Liu Gou Hua
After the Disabled God of War Became My Concubine
3

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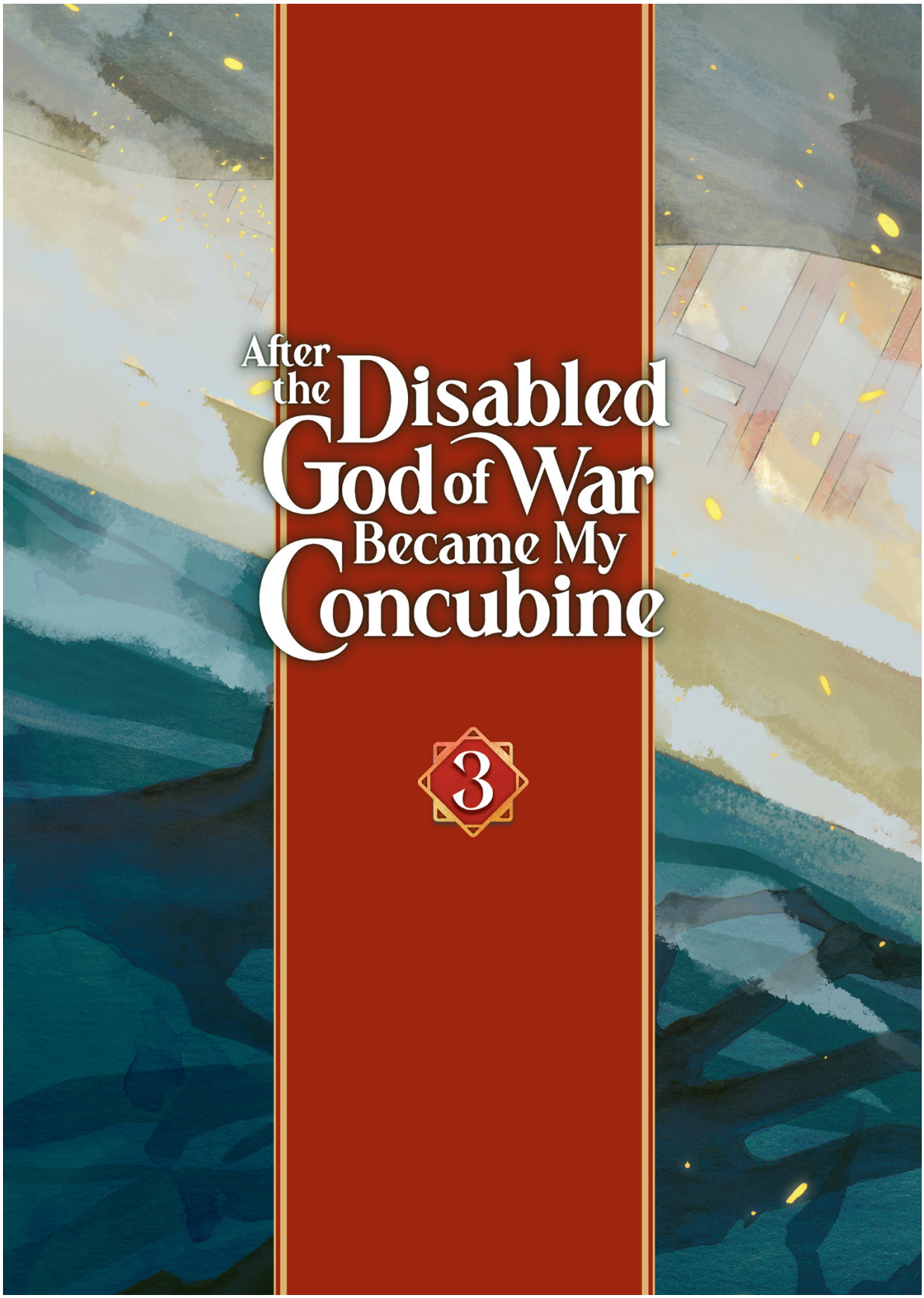
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After the Disabled God of War Became My Concubine (Novel) Vol. 3

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Chapter 70

THOUGH THE JOURNEY to the hunting grounds had taken quite a while, Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu's return trip to the capital proceeded much more quickly without the emperor's procession in tow.

At nightfall, the carriage came to a stop at the entrance of the prince's residence. The prince himself, however, was sound asleep.

Between the fog of illness and the intense jostling of the carriage, Jiang Suizhou had spent the past several hours in a daze. By the end of the journey, he found himself so disoriented that he could hardly tell north from south or east from west.

The instant the carriage stopped, Meng Qianshan hopped out and rushed inside to call for someone to summon the doctor. Servants carefully helped Jiang Suizhou down from the carriage and into the litter.

As Huo Wujiu watched silently from his wheelchair, he couldn't help but feel somehow…empty.

He'd held someone else in his arms for an entire day, so of course he'd absorbed some of the other person's body heat. More than that, the prince seemed to burrow into his embrace like a small animal, exhaling warm breath directly over his heart.

Now, as the evening breeze blew past, that heat-soaked half of his body suddenly cooled.

Huo Wujiu sat there, motionless. He only snapped out of it slightly when Wei Kai came up to him to push his wheelchair.

Then he heard Meng Qianshan's voice: "Your Highness?"

Huo Wujiu immediately looked over.

Although he couldn't hear whatever Jiang Suizhou was saying from inside the litter, Huo Wujiu watched Meng Qianshan glance repeatedly and obviously in his direction.

“Don’t worry, Your Highness,” Meng Qianshan said. “Madam Huo is here.”

Huo Wujiu’s grip on the armrest tightened.

…What a fool.

A gaggle of servants swiftly escorted Jiang Suizhou into Anyin Hall. Shortly after, Wei Kai pushed Huo Wujiu’s wheelchair into the courtyard as well.

The entire hall was brightly lit. The maids poured into the main room from the courtyard.

Wei Kai, standing behind Huo Wujiu, noticed the way his general’s gaze lingered on the main hall.

“Rest assured, General,” Wei Kai comforted him softly. “Li Changning is already there.”

“Let’s get moving,” Huo Wujiu replied.

Wei Kai understood instantly, of course, and he didn’t object. He obediently complied and pushed the wheelchair toward the main room.

Because their frail prince fell ill rather frequently, the servants had plenty of experience dealing with this sort of situation. Everyone in the room was already busy with some task that needed to be done, and everything appeared to be proceeding in a fairly methodical manner.

Huo Wujiu dismissed Wei Kai with a wave of his hand, then wheeled himself into Jiang Suizhou’s bedroom.

The servants didn’t have time to attend to him, and he also made sure to stay out of their way. He parked himself quietly in a secluded corner near the bed and observed as Li Changning administered treatment to Jiang Suizhou.

Since the carriage had been dim, it was only here under the blazing lamplight that Huo Wujiu could clearly see just how flushed and feverish Jiang Suizhou had become.

Out of nowhere, a memory abruptly surfaced in Huo Wujiu’s mind.

When he’d first been sent to the Prince of Jing’s residence, Huo Wujiu’s wounds had been extensive and gruesome. No one had treated his

injuries in prison, and he'd had only his own strength to rely upon as he clung to life in that damp, gloomy cell. At the time, he knew very well why he'd been sent to the Prince of Jing's residence, and he'd prepared for humiliation at the prince's hands. He anticipated unspeakable torment…but that torment never came.

On the contrary, this prince even stayed at his bedside to watch over Huo Wujiu when his untreated wounds led him to develop a persistent high fever.

Foolish, indeed.

Not once did Huo Wujiu request that the Prince of Jing make any kind of sacrifice on his behalf. Truthfully, even if they had been on opposite sides of this conflict, Huo Wujiu wouldn't normally have lashed out unprovoked. His enemy was Jiang Shunheng, not his younger brother. It would have been pointless to redirect his hatred to an inconsequential prince, someone incapable of defying Jiang Shunheng's imperial edict.

He'd never asked, yet Jiang Suizhou insisted on giving him everything he had to give. Worse yet, the naive prince didn't seem to realize that pouring so much emotional energy into another person could perhaps cause them to develop certain feelings they shouldn't be having.

As Huo Wujiu gazed at him calmly, something stirred within his chest—an overwhelming desire to protect and care for the person before him.

Well…on the other hand, was it really so terrible to have such feelings?

After all, who *wouldn't* fall for Jiang Suizhou? No one could possibly dislike him, and it stood to reason that Huo Wujiu would end up captivated.

So captivated, in fact, that he couldn't look away if he tried.

It wasn't until Li Changning finally straightened up again that Huo Wujiu broke his gaze. The physician shot a fleeting glance at him in the corner, then turned toward Meng Qianshan as if he hadn't seen Huo Wujiu at all.

Meng Qianshan promptly trotted over.

"Physician Li, how is His Highness faring?"

“There’s no cause for concern, Meng-gonggong,” Li Changning said, exhaling slowly. “His Highness merely caught a chill. The only reason he’s unconscious right now is because he wasn’t treated immediately. I will prepare some medicine for His Highness—with that and plenty of rest, he should make a full recovery in a few days.”

Meng Qianshan let out a deep sigh and repeatedly chanted Buddha’s name.

Then he ushered Li Changning to the side so he could begin preparing the medicine. The room full of servants gradually emptied as they finished their various tasks.

Huo Wujiu slowly rolled himself over to the bed. He reached out, and with a gentle touch, he pressed the back of his hand against Jiang Suizhou’s cheek.

His skin was so hot it felt almost scalding. Truly, he was quite a pitiful sight to behold.

Though Huo Wujiu didn’t utter a word, his actions did not escape Meng Qianshan’s keen eye. The eunuch moseyed up to him.

“Madam Huo?” he said. “Please, don’t fret. His Highness isn’t in any danger.”

Huo Wujiu made a noise of acknowledgment.

Meng Qianshan studied him for a second. Judging by the way he had planted himself next to the bed, it seemed like Madam Huo intended to stay there and watch over His Highness until he woke up.

A touching gesture, indeed, but Meng Qianshan didn’t dare burden Madam Huo with such a duty.

“Madam has no need to be concerned. His Highness’s medicine will be done boiling any moment now,” he quickly said. “And truthfully, quite a while ago, His Highness instructed me to ask Physician Li to examine you once we returned. It’s getting late, so perhaps Madam should retire to your room and wait there? This servant will keep watch here.”

Huo Wujiu stared silently at Jiang Suizhou for some time.

Normally, he would simply ignore Meng Qianshan’s request and that would be the end of it—not even a team of oxen could drag Huo Wujiu

somewhere he didn’t want to go. However, he felt obligated to listen to him now, and it was all because of the man lying in the bed in front of him, who’d made himself sick purely out of concern for Huo Wujiu’s minor shoulder wound.

It was unfortunate, but there were too many people and eyes in the main room. If someone noticed his injury, it would unquestionably arouse suspicion, and if he didn’t go back to his quarters to bandage his wound now, he’d lose the chance to do so. And then when Jiang Suizhou woke up the next day…

Well, he wouldn’t be happy—that was for sure.

Just like that, every brick in the wall making up Huo Wujiu’s unbending, bullheaded obstinance crumbled to dust with little fanfare.

Meng Qianshan felt his heart rise to his throat. A beat later, just as he was about to try and persuade him again, he heard Huo Wujiu’s voice ring out.

“Let’s go,” he said.

There was, unexpectedly, a subtle hint of compromise in his voice.

***

From that day forward, Wei Kai finally understood what his general’s intentions were with the Prince of Jing.

It wasn’t as if he were completely sheltered, of course. He’d heard the occasional rumor about men engaging in certain…*behaviors*, but he’d never taken any of the rumors he’d heard about others to heart and simply laughed them off. The thought that a man could actually come to like another man seemed almost impossible. Never in his life could he have imagined his general to be such a man, nor that the target of his affections would be the Prince of Jing.

It was an immense shock. At the same time, though, Wei Kai found he couldn’t muster up his previous dislike for the Prince of Jing anymore—not since the hunting expedition.

After all, the Prince of Jing was extremely good to General Huo. When Pang Shao had tormented and humiliated the general the other day, it was the Prince of Jing who'd stepped forward to save him in the nick of time, concealing the truth about his healed legs. Likewise, Wei Kai was also well aware that it was no coincidence the Prince of Jing had suddenly fallen ill afterward, giving his general a chance to return to Lin'an with him to receive medical attention.

Even though the Prince of Jing was that wretched emperor's younger brother by blood, Wei Kai knew that he should strive to repay the prince's kindness.

Furthermore, he wasn't so sure that the Prince of Jing saw General Huo in that light at all. As far as he could tell, his general's interest and enthusiasm were entirely one-sided! Once, General Huo had garnered a following of infatuated maidens and damsels in Yangguan. Now, this very same man looked at the prince like he wanted to devour him.

Objectively, Wei Kai had to admit that his general seemed like a bit of a scumbag here.

The Prince of Jing considered them to be friends! How…how could General Huo start to have…*those* kinds of thoughts about him instead?!

Still, despite his internal criticism, Wei Kai couldn't help but take his general's side in the end.

Indeed, he felt a little sorry for him.

The general had been a bachelor for over twenty years, after all. Forget marriage—this was the first time he'd so much as taken a liking to someone else. After they returned to the prince's residence, General Huo took to sitting in his room in stony silence every single day. He waited with increasing impatience, but His Highness the Prince of Jing never once paid him a visit.

Technically, there was no reason for him to visit.

They were back at the residence in Lin'an, so naturally Wei Kai and Li Changning weren't about to neglect General Huo's injuries. But that was beside the point, really. The issue wasn't whether their general needed someone to take care of him; rather, it was that he simply wanted to see his beloved.

Yet day after day, the Prince of Jing failed to appear. Only the prince's eunuch came by, and only briefly. After he made sure that General Huo was doing fine, he immediately tried to withdraw from the room.

Then, at last, General Huo broke his silence.

"Is your prince doing well?" he asked.

"He's doing quite well, actually!" the eunuch answered brightly. "Physician Li is a brilliant doctor. With just a few of his decoctions, His Highness has almost fully recovered! His immune system is still just a tad weak, but he can already move about with ease!"

Huo Wujiu paused briefly.

"That's…good to hear," he said, slow and halting.

This conversation filled Wei Kai with such anxiety that he felt he might jump out of his very skin.

To him, the look on his general's face was as clear as day—he might as well have written the words *"Then why isn't he coming to see me?"* across his forehead.

But the eunuch seemed to have other matters to attend to, and he failed to notice General Huo's expression. Smiling, he cupped his hands and bowed before leaving the room.

The moment the door slid shut again, a shadow descended across General Huo's face, and Wei Kai's heart sank.

He hurried over to his general's side.

Huo Wujiu said nothing for a long moment. He just frowned and kneaded the space between his eyebrows in silence. Then, just as Wei Kai opened his mouth, his general finally spoke.

"Wei Kai," he said.

Instantly, Wei Kai replied, "General?"

His general was quiet for another second.

"Did I…do something to make him mad?" he ventured somewhat hesitantly. "Can you help me think?"

His voice was tinged with confusion. Stranger still, there was actually a note of caution—and it was so uncanny, Wei Kai almost wondered if his general had been possessed.

He couldn't bear it any longer.

"…General," he said. "If you truly wish to see him, perhaps you should seek him out yourself."

***

Jiang Suizhou was indeed trying to avoid Huo Wujiu, at least to some degree.

He hadn't forgotten the thoughts that had drifted through his addled mind in the back of that carriage. The following morning, he'd woken up bright and early to find that while his fever had subsided considerably, his head had still been filled with thoughts of Huo Wujiu.

To think he'd fallen for Huo Wujiu—of all people.

For a while, Jiang Suizhou had half convinced himself that this was some sort of hallucination born from pretending to be a cut-sleeve for too long. He racked his brain repeatedly, going over every thought and memory he had, only to conclude that he didn't feel anything toward men in general. And yet, Huo Wujiu seemed to be an exception—the mere thought of him made Jiang Suizhou's pulse quicken.

Seriously…what the hell am I supposed to do?

The answer was that, for now at least, he could do nothing. Consumed by guilt and panic, he found himself unsure how to proceed. How could he figure out how to face Huo Wujiu when he couldn't even face himself? It scared him the way that his heart wanted to thunder out of his chest whenever he thought about or saw the man.

Consequently, he decided to bury his head in the sand for as long as he could. He shut himself away in his room for several days on end in an effort to avoid the issue entirely.

Sure, it didn’t solve anything, but at least he could at least delay the inevitable for a bit. This way, he could confront his problems in his own time…

Before he knew it, several days had passed, and spring was drawing to a close.

As expected, Huo Wujiu didn’t seek him out either.

It had always been like this. Huo Wujiu had an aloof temperament, and his physical mobility was “impaired.” As a result, he tended to stay in his room all day; Jiang Suizhou was always the one taking the initiative to drop by. Now that he was keeping his distance, they no longer saw each other at all.

While Jiang Suizhou was grateful for this, he couldn’t help but feel a bit hurt about it as well.

An unrequited love was always bittersweet, after all.

Hence, Jiang Suizhou was also quite listless during his self-imposed isolation. Since there was no need to go to the ministry, he simply holed himself up in his private quarters and slept.

The Prince of Jing’s residence remained as somber as ever, even when the Dragon Boat Festival, held on the fifth day of the fifth lunisolar month, arrived. It could be considered an important day, yet because the Prince of Jing was ill, the festive air that gradually took over most of the city didn’t breach the perimeter of Anyin Hall.

But it was on this day that this sorry state of affairs finally came to an end.

Jiang Suizhou had nearly recovered from his cold. After his midday nap, he sat against the headboard of his bed, reading a book. He’d dismissed all the servants in the room, creating a temporary bubble of peace and tranquility; all he could hear was the sound of the leaves and trees rustling in the courtyard.

Bit by bit, the sun sank toward the horizon.

When he heard the door open, he assumed it was Meng Qianshan, and he flipped to the next page in the book without bothering to look up.

“What is it?” he asked languidly.

He was greeted by Huo Wujiu’s voice.

“It’s me.”

Jiang Suizhou jolted.

He froze in place, even more loath to lift his head.

For an instant, he wanted nothing more than to bury his face in his blanket. Maybe if he could hide it from Huo Wujiu, then he could also hide away his secret feelings, so Huo Wujiu wouldn’t discover them.

Chapter 71

JIANG SUIZHOU'S HEAD WAS LOWERED, and the bed was dimly lit. As such, Huo Wujiu didn't notice the extent to which he was avoiding him.

The door closed, leaving only the two of them in the room. Bracing one hand against his wheelchair, Huo Wujiu pushed himself to his feet and headed straight for Jiang Suizhou.

"I heard from Meng Qianshan that you're doing much better now." He paused, then added in a deliberately nonchalant tone, "How come you haven't left your room?"

Jiang Suizhou hesitated for a moment before answering. "…Didn't feel like moving."

"Not even today?"

That question gave Jiang Suizhou pause, and he glanced over in puzzlement.

"What's special about today?" he asked.

Huo Wujiu gazed down at him. "You don't know?"

Only then did Jiang Suizhou realize that Huo Wujiu was dressed rather unusually, in an unassuming robe, cut from coarse cloth. It somewhat resembled the clothing worn by Li Changning's apprentice, actually. He was carrying another set of sky-blue robes, just as rough and common-looking as his own.

Just as Jiang Suizhou opened his mouth, the blue robes landed in his lap.

The fabric was cold to the touch and infused with the clean scent of honey locust—freshly laundered.

"Change into this, then," Huo Wujiu said.

"What?" Jiang Suizhou stared at him blankly.

Huo Wujiu looked at him for a second, almost fondly exasperated, before his hand settled atop Jiang Suizhou's head.

“It’s the fifth day of the fifth month,” he said. “Get changed. I’m taking you out to enjoy the festivities.”

As though he didn’t care in the slightest whether Jiang Suizhou agreed or not, Huo Wujiu left the bedroom’s inner chamber with the imperious manner of someone who was just waiting for him to change clothes.

By the time Jiang Suizhou came to his senses, Huo Wujiu had already taken a seat in the outer room. Only the shadowy outline of his silhouette was visible through the folding screen.

Even in plain, coarse garments, he still possessed an unparalleled poise and presence.

What had he said just now?

Jiang Suizhou clutched the robes, completely dumbfounded.

The fifth day of the fifth month was the Dragon Boat Festival…and Huo Wujiu wanted to go gallivant around the city on a day like this?

That was simply asking for trouble! The residence was heavily fortified to begin with, and the emperor had planted even more spies and imperial guards in the surrounding area after Huo Wujiu’s arrival. The Prince of Jing’s residence was more like a fortress these days. Surely Huo Wujiu wasn’t so deluded as to think they’d be able to sneak out through the main gate.

Moreover, well…

Jiang Suizhou shot another look at the outer room. On the other side of the folding screen, Huo Wujiu was drinking a cup of tea he’d poured for himself.

Given the current state of Jiang Suizhou’s feelings, it was probably a bad idea for them to spend time together.

***

Meanwhile, in the outer room, Huo Wujiu wasn’t nearly as unaffected as he appeared.

In the past, it had always been Jiang Suizhou visiting him. Huo Wujiu had never been the sort of person to approach others first—let alone approaching someone who stirred such feelings of uncertainty and longing within him. Consequently, he'd truly gone to great lengths to prepare this excursion.

To top it off, he wasn't very confident in the excuse he'd come up with to see Jiang Suizhou.

Because he needed a reason to visit, of course; he couldn't just swing by out of the blue. At the same time, he had no desire to rehash another dull discussion about Pang Shao and Jiang Shunheng, so "official business" wouldn't be a serviceable excuse. After mulling it over for some time, Huo Wujiu came up with a plan inspired partly by his own childhood experiences. As a boy, he would frequently escape from the marquis's residence to run wild.

But who knew if such a plan would work to entice this noble and proper young master, who'd grown up in the imperial city.

For this reason, Huo Wujiu's calm and composed demeanor from earlier was nothing more than a paper tiger.

He remained seated, stiff as a board. The tea was tasteless on his tongue as he stared fixedly at some work of art hanging on the wall, painted by some acclaimed artist.

A moment later, Jiang Suizhou stepped out from behind the screen.

"Huo Wujiu, where exactly are you taking me?" he asked. "This residence is kept under close watch. Unauthorized entry and departure is strictly forbidden, so if it isn't urgent, it's best not to take this risk…"

Huo Wujiu raised his head just as Jiang Suizhou halted awkwardly next to the folding screen, his expression rigid. As he hesitated there, his body language clearly expressed the reluctance he felt.

Even so, those sky-blue robes truly suited him. Though he was blessed with delicate, bewitching features, they were always smothered by the heavy black-and-gold ceremonial robes worn by princes. Now that he was clad in much simpler robes, with his long hair bound back, he seemed no different from any other young scholar of modest origins.

Huo Wujiu's heart seemed to skip a beat at the sight of him.

A smile spread across his face as he stood up and strode over to take his hand. Jiang Suizhou balked, but Huo Wujiu grasped his wrist before he could pull away.

"Let's go," Huo Wujiu said.

Jiang Suizhou drew back in an attempt to evade him.

But Huo Wujiu had a firm grip, and he had no intention of giving him an opportunity to break away. He tugged Jiang Suizhou along, heading straight for the window in the rear chamber.

"Don't worry," Huo Wujiu reassured him.

Jiang Suizhou put up one last fight. "What if someone realizes we're gone…?"

"It's fine. I already let Meng Qianshan know as I was coming in here," Huo Wujiu responded steadily. "He knows I have business with you, and I told him not to let anyone in to disturb us."

As if that excuse weren't ripe for misinterpretation!

While Jiang Suizhou struggled to wrap his head around everything, he felt Huo Wujiu's hand settle on his waist. In an instant, he tightened his grip and pulled Jiang Suizhou under his wing.

And then the ground disappeared from underneath their feet.

An evening breeze swept across Jiang Suizhou's face, and the last light from the setting sun washed over him.

Just like that, they jumped out of the room through the window.

It took only a few breaths and several light steps for Huo Wujiu to vault out of the courtyard and climb onto the roof of the manor. Jiang Suizhou suddenly found himself looking down on the residence from above.

This was his first time seeing it in its entirety from such a perspective.

Below him, the servants bustled around between buildings, and the imperial guards patrolled the general area. But the path that Huo Wujiu picked out was carefully calculated, ensuring they remained in the guards'

blind spots. As they leaped out of the residence, Jiang Suizhou could feel his robes fluttering and snapping in the wind.

By the time Huo Wujiu let go of him and he finally stepped back onto solid ground, they had arrived in an inobtrusive corner tucked in the bend of an alley. It was just off a side street near the residence.

All was quiet around them; not a single person could be seen.

He looked up at Huo Wujiu, somewhat stunned, only to be met with a dashing smile.

It was very faint but unmistakably radiant, like a songbird that had escaped its cage…or maybe an eagle who'd snatched Jiang Suizhou up and carried him off into its territory.

There was a slightly wicked glint in Huo Wujiu's eyes, cool and smug, as he sized Jiang Suizhou up.

"You—" Before Jiang Suizhou could say anything more, Huo Wujiu cut in.

"See? We made it out safe and sound, didn't we?"

As he spoke, he strode calmly toward the exit of the alleyway, tugging Jiang Suizhou along with him.

"Since you're feeling better now, you shouldn't stay cooped up inside," he chided.

"If you can do this, why not go straight back to Northern Liang instead?" Jiang Suizhou mumbled behind him.

Huo Wujiu glanced back at him.

"Is that what you want to do?" he said. "If so, we can leave the city right now."

Jiang Suizhou looked up abruptly, startled.

Still half a step in front of him, Huo Wujiu halted and turned around completely. He wore a serious expression; he didn't seem to be joking.

For a moment, Jiang Suizhou's mind went blank.

"But…" He trailed off.

Huo Wujiu let out a chuckle and said, "Just teasing you."

His voice was warm and light, subconsciously softened. It blended easily into the gentle, balmy breeze of the early summer dusk and came to rest in Jiang Suizhou's ears like a whisper.

***

This was the second time Jiang Suizhou had ever walked through Lin'an's streets.

Last time, he'd come here alone to drown his sorrows after the incident with Ji You. However, he had always been an outsider in this place. Even if he appeared to merge into the crowds of people, there was a clear divide between him and everyone else.

And so, after that day, Jiang Suizhou had never felt the urge to explore the city again.

But…things seemed to be a little different today.

Perhaps it was due to the exceptionally lively atmosphere permeating the city.

The Dragon Boat Festival was considered one of Lin'an's most important festivals, and so the usual curfew was lifted for the occasion. The streets were buzzing with energy and packed with people, surging like the tide, though the evening lanterns had not even been lit yet. Vendors were already setting up their roadside stalls stocked with lanterns and trinkets, a patchwork of vibrant colors and bright lights. From the various food stalls, coils of smoke rose lazily into the dusky sky.

In the distance, lion dance troupes weaved their way through the streets. Street performers stood at the intersections, showcasing their talents, eliciting the occasional burst of cheers and applause.

Since it was crowded, Jiang Suizhou's wrist remained in Huo Wujiu's grasp. Through the fabric of his sleeve, Jiang Suizhou could feel its distinctive strength and warmth.

At some point, a smile had begun curving his lips. Perhaps he'd also been infected by the festive environment.

“It really is lively,” he noted. “I couldn’t sense it at all inside the residence.”

In the bustling area around them, no one paid the two any attention, and as soon as the words left his mouth, they were swallowed by the clamor of the crowd.

But Huo Wujiu caught them. With a small laugh, he lowered his head and spoke quietly to Jiang Suizhou.

“I told you it was worth checking out. I didn’t lie to you, did I?”

Jiang Suizhou couldn’t help but laugh as well.

Despite the alarm bells ringing throughout the rational part of his mind, telling him to keep his distance from Huo Wujiu, he had to admit that it truly did make him happy to be walking alongside him like this.

“All right,” Huo Wujiu said abruptly. “Come on, let’s get some dinner.”

Since Jiang Suizhou wasn’t familiar with this area, he allowed Huo Wujiu to take the lead. Luckily, it seemed Huo Wujiu knew exactly where he wanted to go, and they soon arrived at a modestly sized restaurant attached to an inn.

They took up a dining spot on the second floor next to a window. The chairs and table they sat at were rather crudely made, furnished with low-quality earthenware cups filled with the dregs of a run-of-the-mill green tea. But as unremarkable as the interior was, the view from the window was quite nice. With a single glance, one could take in the crowded festival streets below.

While Jiang Suizhou appeared to be unfazed, he kept his eyes on a swivel as Huo Wujiu ordered. Once he’d waved away the waiter, Jiang Suizhou finally voiced the obvious question.

“How did you know about this place?”

Huo Wujiu poured him a cup of tea, the motion smooth and practiced.

“Wei Kai told me about it,” he answered casually. “Li Changning and he stayed in this inn when they first arrived. Apparently, the northern dishes here are highly authentic—really similar to Yangguan.”

Huo Wujiu had already explained it all to him that day in the mountains. The soldiers under his command hadn't been completely wiped out; a good number had survived. They were currently spread throughout Lin'an, with Wei Kai at the helm.

As Jiang Suizhou nodded, he saw Huo Wujiu's gaze land on him.

"We might have to stay here and lie low for now, but why not let you have a taste of the northern cuisine this way first?" he said, then smiled lightly. "Someday, I'll be sure to take you to Yangguan to see the sights."

Jiang Suizhou's heart pounded uncontrollably in his chest.

He could tell just how much Huo Wujiu missed and cherished Yangguan—even his eyes seemed to be shining as he spoke about it.

Yet in that moment, a strikingly convincing delusion took hold of Jiang Suizhou. It felt almost as if Huo Wujiu's clear yearning were not just simple homesickness, but rather that he firmly wanted to integrate Jiang Suizhou into both his past and his future.

Jiang Suizhou was left momentarily speechless. He could only stare at him blankly.

Huo Wujiu appeared to be similarly taken aback. After a pause, he smiled.

"What? Does northern food not agree with you? If it isn't to your taste, we can go to a different place."

Only then did Jiang Suizhou snap out of his daze.

Ah, where had his manners gone?

He quickly pinched himself on the palm and berated himself for being hopeless.

Stuffing his emotions safely back down, he attempted to smooth things over.

"No, not at all. As a prince…" He cleared his throat. "I mean—say, this robe didn't come with a coin pouch, did it? I don't have any silver on me. Did you bring some?"

Chapter 72

HUO WUJIU FELL SILENT, as if he'd only just realized this himself.

"…I forgot."

His expression was exceedingly grave, and his voice was flat and stiff.

Was he serious?! It certainly didn't seem like an act in the slightest. Jiang Suizhou had merely been trying to change the subject, and he'd somehow immediately opened up another can of worms.

He froze, eyes locked on Huo Wujiu. They stared at each other in unreadable silence for a second. Then Huo Wujiu blinked, and a hint of innocence unexpectedly surfaced in his eyes.

So he *was* serious! He really didn't bring any money with him!

Jiang Suizhou had never encountered this kind of situation before in his life, and he immediately flew into a panic. He hastily patted himself up and down, hoping he'd forgotten to remove an accessory or two while changing clothes earlier, but found nothing. All he had were the robes on his back—nothing more, nothing less. And even those weren't that great.

Jiang Suizhou's ability to think briefly fled him.

What now? They had already ordered the food, and it wasn't as if they could just put it on their tab. If they couldn't produce an equivalent form of payment, would they have to go back to the residence to fetch some coins? But how?! Since they'd sneaked out…

In the midst of his fretting, he heard a huff of laughter from the opposite side of the table. Low and deep, it was laced with an undisguisable trace of amusement.

Seconds later, a heavy embroidered pouch landed on the table right in front of him.

Jiang Suizhou looked up to see Huo Wujiu watching him, unruffled and relaxed. Then he glanced back down at the pouch before him. Its design

was unremarkable, but it was clearly filled to the brim with silver.

“Why do you believe everything you hear?” Huo Wujiu arched an eyebrow, his chin propped up in one hand. A smile played on his lips as he leisurely surveyed him.

Finally, it dawned on Jiang Suizhou: Huo Wujiu was teasing him.

This person was truly… Honestly, it was hard to believe this was the same taciturn man who barely spoke a word to anyone when he’d first arrived at the Prince of Jing’s residence; the man whose eyes were cold and vicious whenever Jiang Suizhou had dared to glance his way. Now his wolf’s tail had begun to gradually slip out, revealing a bit of his inherent nature: brazen and wicked.

“Well…how was I supposed to know if you were telling the truth or not?” Jiang Suizhou asked weakly, pressing his lips together. “More importantly, where did you get that money from?”

Huo Wujiu seemed wholly unconcerned.

“Wei Kai,” he said.

“What?” Jiang Suizhou hadn’t expected that answer.

Huo Wujiu picked up the earthenware cup in front of him and took a sip of tea. That brash, confident demeanor of his, combined with his unperturbed, matter-of-fact expression, gave him the undeniable air of a rebel leader who’d carved out his own territory to rule over.

“It’s his savings from the past few months, along with the reward money granted by your residence,” Huo Wujiu said. “He has no use for it since he doesn’t go out, so he gave it to me.”

Jiang Suizhou was at a loss for words.

Who could’ve imagined that the great General Huo—whose valiant, heroic deeds would one day carve his name deep in the annals of history—would seize his subordinate’s silver just to have a meal in the city?

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Although Jiang Suizhou did feel a twinge of guilt toward Wei Kai, he still ended up finishing the meal with Huo Wujiu.

Indeed, this innkeeper’s northwestern dishes were packed with incredibly distinctive flavors—allegedly, he had come to Lin’an when the Jing court had moved south. Despite Jiang Suizhou’s small appetite, he found himself taking a few extra bites simply because the food was delectable. By the time they’d finished their meal, the sun had completely sunk below the horizon.

Lanterns, bright and vivid, glowed to life along the streets and markets, further bolstering the jubilant atmosphere of the festival.

Jiang Suizhou stuffed the bag of silver back into Huo Wujiu’s hands. Once he’d settled the bill, they left the restaurant together and joined the tide of people thronging the street.

To Jiang Suzihou, everything here was novel and exciting.

He had a superficial understanding of the Jing dynasty’s culture and customs, but needless to say, reading a description in a book was very different from witnessing it with his own eyes.

Though they weren’t in a position to bring anything back to the residence with them, that didn’t mean he couldn’t browse the stalls. He kept peering around him as they strolled through the streets, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

Huo Wujiu, on the other hand, didn’t have much interest in these things. This city certainly wasn’t the same as Yangguan, but the differences were trivial. He’d seen it all by now.

To Huo Wujiu, Jiang Suizhou was much more interesting.

Here was a young nobleman from the imperial family who’d grown up in the capital city: a prince who appeared to be haughty and prideful despite his sheltered upbringing. In truth, he had yet to see much of the world at all. He seemed fascinated by the toys and trinkets that couldn’t have been any more commonplace among the masses. Those clear, bright eyes were unusually animated and full of almost childlike wonder at everything around him.

No one paid them any attention, caught up in the ebb and flow of the crowd. Not a single person noticed the way Huo Wujiu's eyes remained fixed on the man beside him, quiet and unwavering, with a hidden depth beyond even his own understanding.

Following the steady stream of people, they eventually made their way to the end of the street.

A number of people had formed a circle around a troupe of traveling entertainers. The men at the center of the circle were bare from the waist up, in the midst of a performance.

One of them held a torch in his hand, his cheeks bulging—it wasn't clear with what. But it sent a tongue of flame spraying out from the torch when he blew on it, eliciting a round of startled cries and cheers.

Jiang Suizhou's footsteps slowed.

These traveling entertainers had always seemed immensely mysterious and mystical to him. Very little was recorded about them in the historical accounts, which made them appear all the more legendary. He came to a total stop just as the entertainers finished their fire-breathing demonstration and immediately launched into sword swallowing.

A couple of young apprentices flipped around joyfully nearby, their faces painted to resemble traditional xiqu opera masks. As the spectators shouted their hoorays and cheered them on, Jiang Suizhou was inevitably swept up in the excitement as well. Gradually, an awed smile lit up his face.

When Huo Wujiu tilted his head to look at him, he couldn't stop a smile of his own from forming.

Everyone feared the notoriously sinister Prince of Jing. He was known far and wide as a treacherous schemer, rotten to the core. Only Huo Wujiu could see through that aloof, unapproachable front he put up; only he could see just how charming and likable the Prince of Jing truly was, deep down.

This precious treasure had gone undiscovered for too long. Now, it belonged to Huo Wujiu alone.

At that moment, the troupe wrapped up another segment. Several of the children who were in charge of striking the gongs promptly flipped

them over and began soliciting tips from the surrounding spectators, beaming.

Clink! Clink! Copper coins rained across the ground.

Soon, the majority of the crowd dispersed, pushing Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu to the forefront.

As Jiang Suizhou watched the kids collect the coins, utterly engrossed, a slender hand abruptly pressed a cold object into his palm with calloused fingertips.

He lowered his head to find a small, rounded silver ingot sitting on his palm. Confused, he looked up again.

Huo Wujiu calmly returned his gaze. He held the embroidered pouch loosely in one hand.

“Toss it,” he instructed, seeing the baffled expression on Jiang Suizhou’s face.

Ah, so he wanted him to throw it as a tip.

As thoroughly entertained as he was, Jiang Suizhou had given up on the idea of offering them any sort of payment. He had no money at hand, after all. But now that he’d been given the ability to do so, the itch to reward the skilled performers instantly returned.

He flashed a smile at Huo Wujiu, then with a flick of his wrist, he tossed the glittering silver piece into the circle. It landed next to one of the children’s feet.

The child had been dutifully gathering copper coins but promptly let out an excited yelp and snatched up the silver piece. He turned and bowed in Jiang Suizhou’s direction.

Jiang Suizhou was so focused on the child’s delight that he completely missed the way Huo Wujiu’s Adam’s apple had bobbed, ever so slightly, when he smiled at him.

Suddenly, another cool piece of processed silver found its way to his palm.

He shot an astonished glance at Huo Wujiu. Gazing back at him, Huo Wujiu lifted his chin toward the troupe, indicating for him to continue.

After a pause, Jiang Suizhou lobbed that silver ingot as well.

And then a third was thrust into his hand.

Before long, flashes of silver began to rain down in quick succession as ingot after ingot plummeted noisily to the ground, one after another. Once the other entertainers realized that there was a generous, wealthy patron in the audience, the situation devolved into a bit of a scramble. Numerous eyes turned to Jiang Suizhou, their owners amazed and appreciative, and a slight embarrassment flushed through him.

This time, when Huo Wujiu tried to give him another ingot, he nudged it back toward him.

“All right, that’s enough,” he whispered.

In response, the ingot was quite insistently shoved into his palm once more.

“It’s fine. There’s still plenty left,” said Huo Wujiu.

Jiang Suizhou was hesitant. “But…”

Of course it was nice to see those traveling entertainers smile at him at all, but wasn’t this a bit too…flashy?

“Did you enjoy the show?” Huo Wujiu asked.

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

“Then keep going,” Huo Wujiu said.

Jiang Suizhou looked at him, then at the ecstatic entertainers. Their clothes were coarse and shabby, and they all appeared quite thin. Even though the children with the mask face paint were dripping with sweat, smearing the designs, they continued bouncing around enthusiastically, the silver cupped in their hands.

He obliged and tossed yet another piece of silver to them.

Huo Wujiu, whose gaze had remained fixed on Jiang Suizhou the entire time, swiftly pulled another ingot from the pouch. He placed it on Jiang Suizhou’s palm as soon as it was empty.

Who cared about some meaningless bits of silver, anyway? As far as he was concerned, they were nothing special.

Caught up in the moment, all he could see was how beautiful Jiang Suizhou's face was when he smiled.

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Some time passed before they finally left that area.

As they walked away, Jiang Suizhou forced Huo Wujiu to show him the pouch. Without batting an eye, Huo Wujiu held it up in front of him and shook it a little. It was noticeably lighter than before but nowhere near empty.

"See? I told you there's a lot left," Huo Wujiu said nonchalantly.

Jiang Suizhou gritted his teeth in frustration.

"But still!" he protested, keeping his voice low. "That was completely over the top! What if the wrong person saw? Then what would we do?"

"No one saw," Huo Wujiu said with absolute certainty.

"How can you be sure?" Jiang Suizhou pressed.

Huo Wujiu jerked his chin to gesture southward. "Currently, everyone who's anyone in Lin'an is at West Lake, enjoying the scenery."

He paused, and suddenly his lips curled into a mischievous grin.

"There'll be floating lanterns, pleasure boats, and dragon boat races," he continued, leaning in close to Jiang Suizhou. "Later in the evening, they'll even release sky lanterns by the lake. Do you want to see?"

Jiang Suizhou had no idea how Huo Wujiu had collected all this intel. What he did know was that the lake in question was connected to Lake Tai, which boasted a grand, resplendent tower with scenic views. Quite a few influential officials would most likely be there, on account of today's festivities.

Naturally, Jiang Suizhou didn't dare to hang around right under their noses.

He quickly drew back, only for Huo Wujiu to catch hold of his wrist.

“If you want to go, let’s go,” he insisted, the hint of a smirk playing across his lips. He cast a glance at Jiang Suizhou before firmly tugging him away.

“I *don’t* want to!” Jiang Suizhou replied hastily. “There’s going to be a lot of people at the lake, and a good number of them will know who we are. We shouldn’t risk it…”

Unfortunately for him, Huo Wujiu was nothing if not a risk-taker.

“It’s fine,” he said. “We’ll stick together; I won’t let them spot us.”

Jiang Suizhou still wasn’t reassured.

But he also couldn’t persuade Huo Wujiu otherwise. Huo Wujiu was physically strong, and he possessed a mastery over martial arts that went far beyond what an ordinary person could achieve. If he truly set his mind to something, no one would be able to stop him—that was a given.

Jiang Suizhou let Huo Wujiu drag him down half a street. At this point, Lake Tai was mere paces away.

The surface of the lake rippled and glistened in the glow of the lanterns, which were so bright and numerous that they illuminated the water as if it were daytime. Pleasure boats and dragon boats alike floated at the edge of the lake, elaborate and ornate, accompanied by the distant pounding of drums.

A magnificent five-story tower stood on the lakefront, its glazed roof tiles shining under the lamplight. It was Lin’an’s famous Mingfeng Tower—an impressive sight, indeed.

At this moment, the tower was ablaze with light, and the fluttering robes and graceful figures of women were faintly visible.

Jiang Suizhou’s entire body tensed.

But Huo Wujiu didn’t stop. Instead, he barreled straight ahead toward the tower.

At the last possible second, Jiang Suizhou dug in his heels and yanked him back.

“Wait a second!”

“What’s wrong?”

Just as Huo Wujiu was about to reassure him again, Jiang Suizhou wordlessly pulled him over to a little stall selling a colorful array of charms and trinkets. Most of them were protective items that could be used to ward off evil and misfortune during the Dragon Boat Festival.

Jiang Suizhou fished out a piece of silver from the pouch, then pulled down one of the objects hanging on display and brought it to Huo Wujiu.

“There we go.” Jiang Suizhou let out a sigh of relief.

Any expression Huo Wujiu might have made was quickly concealed beneath the ferocious, beastlike mask that Jiang Suizhou had placed over his face.

Chapter 73

HUO WUJIU COULDN'T STOP HIMSELF from letting out a quiet laugh, muffled by the mask.

If he were actually spotted in public, it wouldn't really matter if his face was covered or not. Someone would inevitably recognize him on account of his build alone. He had only sneaked out with Jiang Suizhou like this specifically because he had no intention of letting anyone from the court see him in the first place.

Still…it could come in handy, he thought as his fingers brushed over the mask.

And more importantly, it was something given to him by Jiang Suizhou.

With that settled, he resumed dragging Jiang Suizhou toward the lake.

"If that's soothed your worries now, let's go," Huo Wujiu said.

Jiang Suizhou simply hummed in agreement and swiftly followed after him.

Indeed, there was no opportunity for someone to recognize either of them.

At the end of the street, Huo Wujiu led him deep into another alley, after which he gathered him close and leaped onto the roof again, soaring across the eaves toward Mingfeng Tower.

The streets below were brightly lit, but the two men remained undetectable against the inky expanse of the sky above, like birds gliding furtively through the night.

Jiang Suizhou knew that Huo Wujiu was going to bring him to the lakefront, of course, but he hadn't expected them to take to the skies again to get there. Much to his surprise, Huo Wujiu beelined for the top of Mingfeng Tower itself.

With a few brisk bounds, Huo Wujiu vaulted up to the roof, the world spinning before Jiang Suizhou's eyes.

A moment later, his blurry vision resolved into a panoramic view of Lake Tai. Colorful lanterns dotted the surface of the lake like stars in the night sky, shining upon the racing and pleasure boats floating across the water.

In the distance was Lin'an, awash with light.

Beneath him in Mingfeng Tower would be where all the dignitaries had gathered today. In a place like this, the higher the floor, the more expensive the banquet halls were. Considering the holiday festivities going on, it was safe to assume that Pang Shao and his family were likely occupying the hall directly below their feet.

At that instant, a muffled voice echoed through the roof.

"…This humble official drinks a toast to Minister Pang!"

Oh? So Pang Shao really was here, holding a feast with the officials from his faction.

Jiang Suizhou immediately froze in alarm as a low, familiar laugh rang out beside him.

"What a coincidence," Huo Wujiu said offhandedly.

"You—!" What could he even say in response to this unbelievably brazen man? Stunned by Huo Wujiu's behavior, all Jiang Suizhou could do was stare at him blankly and try to calm his racing heart. It felt like it was about to burst out of his chest from the fear and adrenaline.

Surely none in the Pang faction could have imagined this scenario—not even in their wildest dreams. Not only were Huo Wujiu's legs healed, he'd used them to climb atop the very tower in which they were feasting, all to view the dragon boats during the height of the holiday festivities.

After throwing a carefree smile at Jiang Suizhou, Huo Wujiu pulled him down to sit on the ridge of the glazed-tile roof.

Fortunately, Mingfeng Tower had an expansive rooftop. The glazed tiles glinted sharply in the glow of the enormous decorative lanterns that dangled from each corner. Taller than the average person, they lit up most

of the roof. Perfectly positioned in the shadows, Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu had all of Lin'an sprawled beneath their feet, in a sea of lights.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't help but scoot closer to Huo Wujiu.

"Don't you think you're being just a bit too audacious?" he sighed.

"You'd consider *this* audacious?" Huo Wujiu remarked breezily as he took off the mask with one hand. He played with it idly as he spoke.

It took a moment for Jiang Suizhou to recover from his shock. Evidently, even the most dignified and upstanding of historical figures were capable of being headache-inducing, devil-may-care menaces in their youth.

Jiang Suizhou glanced at Huo Wujiu, then turned his gaze to the city lights behind him, stretching unbroken to the horizon.

He'd grown accustomed to following the rules. He truly hadn't realized that these heart-pounding, adrenaline-pumping, high-risk situations could also be…unexpectedly entertaining.

Cheerful voices echoed from the room below, interspersed with the clinking of cups as the court officials loudly toasted Pang Shao's accomplishments and ambitions. They were entirely absorbed in the celebrations, and who could blame them? Mingfeng Tower offered luxurious accommodations and the grandest views in the city.

As the most influential ministers in Lin'an feasted, surrounded by the grandeur of the banquet hall, not one of them had the slightest inkling that Great Liang's legendary general might currently be perched on the roof right above their heads.

Meanwhile, the most feared man in Southern Jing lounged on the roof with one leg bent in a casual pose. He looked calm and relaxed, framed by a canopy of stars above and a sea of lights below.

It was truly quite extraordinary.

Jiang Suizhou paused and laughed softly, in spite of himself.

At the sound of his laugh, Huo Wujiu instantly inclined his head to look at him.

"Beautiful, right?" he said. "I didn't lie to you."

“Did you cause trouble like this in Yangguan too?”

Huo Wujiu raised an eyebrow, seemingly a little defiant. “How does this count as ‘causing trouble’?” Then, before Jiang Suizhou could respond, he leaned toward him slightly and nudged him with his shoulder. “You just don’t know how to entertain yourself. That’s why even climbing a roof seems scary to you.”

Jiang Suizhou could only nod in agreement.

It was true: He really didn’t know, even now. His idea of a good time, if he felt so inclined, was burying his nose in a book. Even as a child, he’d always been quiet, obedient, and hassle-free—the opposite of Huo Wujiu, who seemed naturally inclined to run and jump and climb all over the place.

To think Huo Wujiu was capable of being this bold in Lin’an, even with the emperor and Pang Shao looming over them. He must have been an absolute terror running wild in Yangguan as a child. What a pain in the neck for the former marquis!

When that amusing thought crossed his mind, Jiang Suizhou couldn’t help but let out a small chuckle.

Huo Wujiu noticed that Jiang Suizhou didn’t deny the accusation but instead pressed his lips together and then laughed softly. He looked so… quiet and well behaved.

The sight of him tugged at the heartstrings in such a way that his response came automatically, almost subconsciously.

“There’ll be plenty of fun to be had in the future. Just you wait and see.”

He spoke as if he were making a vow, sincere to the point of being a bit childish, full of bravado and cocky self-assurance. It was as if he were a kid thumping his chest and swearing to protect his crush.

The warmth sparked by his words was fiery yet reassuring, and Jiang Suizhou couldn’t stop his heart from fluttering in his chest.

He gazed at Huo Wujiu, his lips parting slightly, at a loss for words. Just then, fervent drumbeats sounded in the distance on the lake.

The dragon boat races had begun, providing a welcome distraction.

Floating lanterns were strewn across the surface of the water, and lamps lined the shore, illuminating the boats as bright as day. The townspeople promptly flocked to the lakeside, bursting into boisterous cheers and applause.

Even the people in the banquet hall beneath them had gathered on the terrace.

Jiang Suizhou closed his mouth nervously.

Huo Wujiu could tell he was worried. In reality, there wasn't any real cause for concern. Mingfeng Tower was constructed to be grand—its roof, in particular, was much taller than the surrounding buildings', and it was also double-layered. Since he and Jiang Suizhou were in the shadows, they could only make out the vague silhouettes of the people on the terrace. As for those officials, they wouldn't be able to see anything even if they looked up.

However, he didn't mention any of this. A smile brimming with interest spilled across his face instead.

To Huo Wujiu, Jiang Suizhou was simply intriguing, in every possible way. He always managed to lure out Huo Wujiu's more wicked tendencies.

He didn't watch the dragon boat race. In fact, up until it ended, his eyes never left Jiang Suizhou.

Despite his nerves, Jiang Suizhou still found himself riveted by the race. His expression was tense, yet his eyes kept darting frantically between the officials beneath them and the dragon boats on the water. All in all, he was quite amusing to study.

He finally relaxed a little once the race concluded and the people on the terrace went back inside.

Taking advantage of a moment where the lakeside crowd erupted in cheers, he leaned in close to Huo Wujiu's ear and asked in a low voice, "Which boat were you rooting for just now?"

Huo Wujiu didn't reply.

Seeing that his gaze was lowered, Jiang Suizhou assumed that he hadn't had a chance to watch the dragon boat race because he'd been

wholly absorbed in monitoring what Pang Shao and his followers were doing beneath them.

Helpfully, Jiang Suizhou started to recount the events of the race to Huo Wujiu.

“At first, I thought number four was doing fairly well, but then the rowers started to flag in the latter half, and number three passed it. In the end, it only came in second. However, number three held steady the entire time—they must’ve trained well for the race. The rowers were also better coordinated—”

All of a sudden, Huo Wujiu lifted his hand. “Shh.”

Jiang Suizhou stopped talking at once and peered below them, following Huo Wujiu’s line of sight.

The officials belonging to the Pang faction had unexpectedly returned to the terrace.

This time, Pang Shao’s figure was among them.

With a jolt, Jiang Suizhou sat bolt upright. Even his breathing grew lighter as he stared at the crowd below.

He failed to notice Huo Wujiu’s surreptitious exhale of relief when he moved away.

Awkwardly, Huo Wujiu raised his hand to his ear—the one that Jiang Suizhou had just whispered into—and rubbed it with his index finger.

Was it really necessary to get that close to him while speaking? Just a brief whisper was enough to make that half of his body go numb and send a tingling sensation racing all the way down his spine to the small of his back, causing something more than just his emotions to stir in response.

Fortunately, Pang Shao was here. His presence should frighten this audacious little fox with no sense of boundaries into keeping his distance for the time being.

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It was Pang Shao’s fellow officials who urged him to come out and join them in releasing lanterns.

They didn’t believe in this sort of thing, of course. They merely wanted to seize the opportunity to curry favor with Pang Shao and bless him with good fortune. Pang Shao, for his part, didn’t turn down their offer; he obliged and exited the hall with them, smiling.

By now, the dragon boat race had already ended, and the townspeople were beginning to release lanterns at the lake, one after another. Pale yellow flames within the white lanterns brought them to life as they rose slowly into the air, filling the sky. It was truly a stunning sight.

Pang Shao came to a stop on the spacious terrace and accepted the sky lantern that a servant offered him.

“I don’t have any particular wishes to make.” He gave a faint smile. “All I hope for is peace and prosperity for this country and good health for His Majesty.”

The surrounding officials all cupped their hands and showered him with praise.

Pang Shao personally wrote down his wish before he lit the flame inside the lantern and let it rise into the sky.

Immediately after that, another official stepped forward with a preprepared lantern.

“How deeply Grand Chancellor cares about his country and people—your subordinate is full of admiration!” the official said, holding out his lantern. “May you find success in all your endeavors, Grand Chancellor, and may you live a long and blessed life!”

Upon witnessing this, Pang Shao smiled in satisfaction and watched as the official released his lantern, nothing but a shroud of hollow flattery filled with hot air.

The two lanterns soared into the air, swaying in the wind before eventually joining the rest of the lights dotting the sky.

The group below gazed at the spectacle for a while longer. Then they gathered around Pang Shao again, chatting and laughing, and went back inside to continue drinking.

Only then did the tension drain from Jiang Suizhou's body, which was drenched in cold sweat beneath his robes.

Still wary, he cast a sidelong glance at Huo Wujiu—but his gaze was turned to the sky. Jiang Suizhou tilted his head to look upward as well, and for a moment they watched quietly as hundreds of sky lanterns drifted through the starry expanse around them.

As Jiang Suizhou's nerves finally settled, he had to admit it was a breathtaking scene.

"It really is beautiful," he said.

"But it's such a pity," Huo Wujiu replied. "I wasn't thinking earlier; I forgot to bring a lantern for you."

"It's a good thing you didn't," Jiang Suizhou said, laughing. "Imagine if we released a lantern from the roof of Mingfeng Tower! You must be looking to get caught."

Huo Wujiu shook his head.

"Either way, we have to make a wish on your behalf," he said. Before Jiang Suizhou could respond, Huo Wujiu amended his statement. "Actually, one isn't enough. It should be two."

Jiang Suizhou let out an amused chuckle.

He wanted to ask Huo Wujiu where he was getting those wishes, but a crisp *crunch* interrupted him as he opened his mouth.

Flinching, he whipped around to discover that Huo Wujiu had snapped one of the glazed roof tiles in half with his bare hands.

With a sudden burst of force, he broke one half into two more pieces.

"Look up," Huo Wujiu instructed, gripping a shard in each hand.

Confused, Jiang Suizhou lifted his head as a tiny, shrill noise whistled into the air.

A nearby lantern faltered almost instantly. In seconds, it was completely consumed by its own flame and eventually extinguished itself in a dusting of ash that crumbled toward the ground.

As it fell, Jiang Suizhou heard Huo Wujiu's voice.

“That was Jiang Shunheng’s peace and prosperity.”

There was another sharp whistle, and another sky lantern went dark.

“And that was Pang Shao’s long and blessed life.”

In the blink of an eye, both lanterns released by Pang Shao and his associate vanished. Amid the manifold ascending lights, their ashes plunged downward, silent and unseen.

Jiang Suizhou turned his head to stare at Huo Wujiu in astonishment. Huo Wujiu just grinned shamelessly back at him, his head tipped to the side playfully and his now empty hands resting lightly on his knees.

For a second, Jiang Suizhou’s heart seemed to stop beating.

This was how Huo Wujiu made a wish on his behalf?

No, this was more akin to a deity on high deliberately plucking out his wish from among the masses, simply so he could bring it before his eyes and tell him: *See? Whatever you desire, I’ll give it to you.*

Chapter 74

IT WAS ALREADY LATE AT NIGHT by the time Huo Wujiu returned to the residence with Jiang Suizhou.

They came in the same way they'd gone out: through the rear window. After accompanying Jiang Suizhou back to his room, Huo Wujiu waited until Jiang Suizhou had changed back into his usual attire before he openly and boldly left through the bedroom door.

Meng Qianshan, who'd kept watch outside, glanced over at Madam Huo as he came out in his wheelchair. He looked radiant, somehow. Meng Qianshan started to speak, then bit back his words.

Huo Wujiu didn't spare him a single look as he swiftly wheeled himself away, with an object of some sort placed atop his knees.

Meng Qianshan couldn't resist following him with his eyes.

Sure enough, a general must be cut from a different cloth than the average person. Even though his legs were maimed and he was in a wheelchair, he still somehow managed to give off the impression that he was striding briskly onward.

Meng Qianshan stared after him for a while longer before he shook his head and went inside to attend to his lord.

Meanwhile, in Huo Wujiu's room, Wei Kai paced in frenzied, erratic circles like an ant on a hot pan.

Besides Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu themselves, Wei Kai was the only one who knew what they were up to that evening. He was left alone to anxiously await his general's return, keenly aware of just how dangerous this little stunt could actually be. Honestly, how could he practically saunter around right under the nose of their most powerful enemies?!

This playing on his mind, he grew increasingly panicked as the night went on.

Finally, with midnight just a few short hours away, Wei Kai's prayers were answered. The door opened, followed by the sound of a wheelchair

rolling across the floor.

Wei Kai sighed in relief. He felt as though he'd just been to hell and back—truly thrilling beyond words.

"General, how'd it go?" he blurted out.

With a flick of his wrist, Huo Wujiu tossed the embroidered pouch over to him. To Wei Kai's dismay, it felt even lighter than anticipated.

In fact, it was nearly empty; only a few pieces of silver remained at the bottom. As he lifted the pouch, the pitifully hollow jingle from within caused him immense pain.

Wei Kai did his best to hide it.

Ah…never mind. He'd only been painstakingly saving up this silver for merely a short while now—just since he had arrived in Southern Jing, destitute and penniless, with little else besides the clothes on his back. His general never had to worry about money growing up, and he never bothered to keep track of how much he had on hand. If he spent it all, then…well… so be it.

Still, Wei Kai was too curious to refrain from asking a question or two.

"Did you buy something, General?" he prodded.

Huo Wujiu stood up from the wheelchair to take a seat nearby, bringing with him the object he'd had on his lap. It was quite large, and as Wei Kai watched him idly fiddle with it, he recognized what it was.

The mask gleamed when Huo Wujiu brought it closer to the lamp. As he studied it in more detail, his eyes glistened with amusement, made all the brighter by the proximity of the lamplight, and a faint smile tugged at one side of his mouth. It was barely noticeable yet dazzling.

"I sure did," Huo Wujiu replied casually. As he spoke, he held up the object slightly and waved it at Wei Kai. "The Prince of Jing gave this to me. Doesn't it look nice?"

Wei Kai swallowed, at a loss for words.

…What do you mean, "Doesn't it look nice?"?!

This was all he got in exchange for that giant pile of silver? Just a crudely crafted mask, painted to look like Taowu? As recorded in *Shen Yi Jing*,[1] Taowu was infamously malevolent—a mythical monster that was known for being pigheaded and foolish, unbridled and ferocious, wreaking havoc upon the natural order of the world and the moral principles governing it. The common folk used its likeness to fight fire with fire, warding off even worse evils.

Why was his general so happy to receive this kind of thing?!

Wei Kai stared at the mask, somewhat speechless. His lack of response displeased Huo Wujiu.

“Have you gone deaf?” he snapped, frowning.

A distinctly hostile look darkened his general’s eyes, and Wei Kai could only resign himself to his fate.

Well, fine. Whatever. He may not have received a formal education, but he still knew when to point at a deer and call it a horse, especially when it came to this particular tyrant. Perhaps stupid, stubborn Taowu himself had cursed his mighty lord to become a total blockhead, but Wei Kai would still have to tell him what he wanted to hear.

“…Yeah, it’s very nice,” he lied reluctantly, under the weight of that oppressive glare.

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Fortunately for Wei Kai, his pocket didn’t end up suffering too much of a loss.

From that day on, he began receiving reward money from the Prince of Jing’s residence, distributed under various pretexts. The total sum was several times larger than the amount he’d lost to Huo Wujiu.

Wei Kai didn’t consider himself the kind of man who would compromise his values for a handful of coins. But after the Prince of Jing returned the silver to him, he couldn’t look at his general—who had carefully stored away that shabby mask as if it were some precious treasure

—the same way again. He couldn’t help but think that the Prince of Jing seemed a bit more decent than General Huo.

The following day, Jiang Suizhou ended his sick leave.

Despite having recovered a while ago, he remained at home for two more days and delayed his return until the Grand Assembly. As much as he might have wished to shirk some of his duties, he knew he couldn’t allow himself to grow complacent during this critical time. After all, he had managed to deal Pang Shao an extremely heavy blow indeed on the day of the hunt.

As expected, when he returned, the atmosphere in the imperial court was exceptionally frigid and tense.

The emperor had always worn his heart on his sleeve, and he broadcast his spurning and snubbing of Pang Shao for all to see. This meant that Pang Shao’s frustration was also quite obvious, which in turn caused his many faction members and associates to grow exceedingly fearful and nervous.

Strangely enough, as the morning progressed, this tension resulted in the assembled officials beginning to behave a bit more like a proper imperial court overall.

However, Jiang Suizhou’s insight told him that deep down, the emperor was only acting this way because he was sulking.

As a history professor, Jiang Suizhou was well versed in the annals of this dynasty, and he knew that the last emperor hadn’t been close at all with his father. The late Emperor Ling of Jing favored the original Prince of Jing’s mother, to the point of neglecting Jiang Shunheng’s mother—the current Empress Dowager Pang—despite the fact that she was his first wife.

According to records, the current emperor rarely saw Emperor Ling during his childhood. In fact, it was alleged that he had no idea who his father was until he was around four or five years old.

This left an opening for his dear uncle Pang Shao to ingratiate himself to the future ruler by spoiling him immensely as he grew up.

Perhaps neither of them realized it, but it was plain as day to Jiang Suizhou: Pang Shao had filled the void created by the absence of the

emperor’s father. Therefore, even though Pang Shao had stirred up so much trouble, the emperor still couldn’t bear to let go of him.

He might punish him, but killing him was out of the question.

All in all, Jiang Suizhou was prepared for their relationship to eventually recover. His main reason for attending the assembly that day was to catch up on major events as of late. Any drama the emperor and Pang Shao might or might not stir up could be considered a bit of free entertainment on the side.

Sure enough, it turned out to be worth the trip.

At one point, an official presented a memorial to the emperor which Jiang Suizhou found particularly interesting. It seemed General Lou would soon make his triumphant return to the capital. He was projected to reach Lin’an in a few days, and when the time came, someone would need to oversee and organize the welcoming ceremony and honor guard for him.

In actuality, this was no easy assignment.

Known for his nasty, stubborn personality, General Lou Yue tended to be hard to please and even more difficult to persuade, remaining unmoved by tactics of brute force and placating words alike. In short, not only would this assignment fail to earn the one in charge of it any favor, it would likely bring them additional trouble.

All the court officials were aware of this, including the emperor himself. He swept an unenthusiastic look around the room until a wonderful idea struck him by chance—something that would bring him happiness for the first time today.

He pointed into the crowd.

“Wudi, I shall entrust the task of welcoming General Lou entirely to you.”

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Some things were seen much more clearly by outsiders than those directly involved.

Following the assembly, Pang Shao's expression remained unpleasant even after he climbed into his carriage.

The emperor had embarrassed him countless times today in court, directly in front of everyone. The other officials were neither deaf nor blind; naturally, all of them took notice of the spectacle.

Nor was Pang Shao made of stone—of course he sensed Jiang Shunheng's unrestrained malice.

If he spoke, that brat on the throne pretended not to hear him. If he made a suggestion, the insolent little whelp chose to do exactly the opposite, deliberately contradicting him with a deadpan look on his face.

These feelings of resentment were foreign to Pang Shao after so long. After the former emperor died, he thought it safe to assume he'd never experience such humiliation again.

Pang Shao's face darkened. On the way back to his residence, he didn't say a single word.

The past few months had been rather rough for him, to say the least. Really, things took a sharp downturn just after the start of the year, and it kept getting worse. He knew the Prince of Jing was behind it—somehow, despite teetering on the verge of dropping dead at any moment, that sickly wretch caused him to suffer setback after setback. Not a single one of the tasks that he took on had gone smoothly. Even the ancestral temple had collapsed mid-construction.

Those were all facts; he could admit it. While infuriating, these were merely bumps in the road. He still held the title of Grand Chancellor, so he hadn't lost yet.

However…

As he sat down in the main hall of his residence and settled in with a cup of tea, his thoughts continued to churn.

The fact of the matter was that ultimately, Pang Shao had no respect for the emperor. He was polite and reverent in public, but in his eyes, the emperor was the same naive, ignorant boy he'd always been—still immature and emotionally stunted, even in his thirties.

Pang Shao decided to propel Jiang Shunheng onto the throne solely because they were related by blood. After all, he'd all but encouraged his eldest sister, the emperor's mother, to raise him to be a slow-witted fool.

Indeed, Jiang Shunheng was extremely easy to manipulate. All Pang Shao had to do was shower him with gifts and hollow gestures. He'd been a spoiled brat from an early age, so these lavish displays easily won his trust and affection.

And then after Jiang Shunheng became emperor, Pang Shao would have control over the highest authority in the land.

But in hindsight…

Lowering the teacup, Pang Shao gazed thoughtfully at the ripples undulating on the surface of the liquid. After a moment, a grim, icy smile cracked across his face.

It seemed that people were no different from cats or dogs. Perhaps they could never be fully tamed. If one treated them well, that became justification for them to demand a mile when you only gave them an inch. If one treated them even a little poorly, they would promptly forget all the kindness you previously bestowed on them.

Pang Shao could only blame himself. In his shortsighted pursuit of quick success, he'd spoiled that creature rotten.

As a result, he'd given Jiang Shunheng the impression that things were backward; that Pang Shao was *his* loyal and obedient follower. Pang Shao's favor became justification for the belief that he was actually the one in charge, and he could walk all over Pang Shao without consequence.

Little did he know that Pang Shao never once cared who was on the throne. There was nothing particularly special about Jiang Shunheng—only that he was convenient and easy to control. It could have been anyone in his place, really, as long as Pang Shao could manipulate them and seize authority over Great Jing himself.

And if Pang Shao could put Jiang Shunheng on the throne once, then he could just as easily replace him with someone younger and easier to control, and get rid of the one who was disobeying him.

It was just a bit of extra work, that was all.

Pang Shao considered this for a long while. Then, with a humorless chuckle, he summoned one of his trusted subordinates.

The subordinate swiftly stepped forward and knelt before him to await his command.

“Isn’t His Majesty’s eldest son about to turn three soon?” Pang Shao asked leisurely.

The subordinate cupped his hands and responded affirmatively.

Pang Shao smiled.

“As I recall, his mother comes from a lowly background—a mere palace maid, wasn’t she?” he mused. “Go inform the empress dowager that the child will be placed under her care. Instruct her to focus solely on raising him; there will be no further discussion.”

***

Inevitably, Jiang Suizhou’s days grew quite a bit busier once he was saddled with the task of welcoming Lou Yue.

The ceremony was inherently complicated and contained many moving parts. On top of all that, Pang Shao’s allies did their best to make trouble for him and make his work unnecessarily difficult.

However, he knew that all of this was well within the realm of normalcy. All of these minor inconveniences were due to Pang Shao’s frustration—it meant he had yet to find a way to bring him down. With that in mind, he proceeded with caution and ordered his men to secretly keep an eye on Pang Shao’s movements.

But overall, Pang Shao had been unusually quiet as of late. In the days leading up to Lou Yue’s return, he didn’t make a single move.

On the day of the welcoming ceremony, the bright blue sky stretched endlessly overhead, without a cloud in sight. Early that morning, Jiang Suizhou left the city with the honor guard and waited outside Lin’an’s southern gate for Lou Yue’s army.

At the same time, an inconspicuous delivery found its way to Huo Wujiu, who was cloistered away in the Prince of Jing's residence.

"General, what does this mean?" Wei Kai asked, frowning.

Huo Wujiu looked at what his subordinate held: a willow branch. It was a poetic token typical of more refined society.

However, spring was already over, which meant the branches of the summer willows were sturdy and springy. Whoever broke it off must have had quite the powerful grip—he'd snapped off the entire branch, solid and thick. It almost looked like a horsewhip.

Huo Wujiu paused as he recalled the slip of paper he had passed to Ji Hongcheng some time ago. A hint of disdain flashed across his face, and he averted his eyes.

"The Prince of Jing left this morning?" he asked.

Wei Kai nodded.

"Then Lou Yue is back."

Chapter 75

JIANG SUIZHOU KNEW it would take a while for the troops to march their way to the capital, so he took shelter inside the carriage while he waited.

The sun gradually rose higher, warming the early summer air. Luckily, the effect was mitigated somewhat by Lin'an's location—near the water, surrounded by dark forests—so even with the sun beating down, it wasn't too unbearable.

It was almost noon by the time a soldier galloped over with news of General Lou's imminent arrival.

Jiang Suizhou quickly exited the carriage and positioned himself in the middle of the road.

Because Lou Yue was returning to the capital with all his soldiers, the troops had to set up camp outside the southern gate. To accommodate this, that entire area had been cordoned off, with the honor guard and ceremonial procession stationed around the perimeter. Among their ranks stood a number of Ministry of Rites officials, headed by Jiang Suizhou. From a distance, it was quite the solemn, stately scene.

Before long, the faint drumming of hoofbeats reached Jiang Suizhou's ears. Gazing intently at the far reaches of the road, he caught his first glimpse of the army on the horizon, marching grandly toward them.

Leading the way was General Lou Yue himself, astride a tall, massive horse. He seemed to be similarly tall and imposing, with proud, broad shoulders as solid as a mountain. His magnificent silver armor glinted wildly in the midday sun, a scarlet cape flapping in the wind behind him.

No doubt about it—that had to be Lou Yue. Jiang Suizhou tried to soothe his nerves, but his palms were already covered in a sheen of sweat.

While the original Prince of Jing had most likely crossed paths with Lou Yue before, Jiang Suizhou had only ever seen his name in historical records. This was his first time meeting him in real life.

By now, Jiang Suizhou had thoroughly familiarized himself with the Prince of Jing's identity. Whatever differences remained between them were indistinguishable to most. But that didn't rule out the possibility that this general, despite his rough exterior, might be unusually observant, and if he'd interacted with the original prince in some way that Jiang Suizhou wasn't aware of, things could go very badly.

He drew a deep breath and waited for the right moment to step into this potential minefield.

As Lou Yue reined in his horse, Jiang Suizhou smiled slightly and bowed, hands folded in front of him.

"With utmost respect, this prince welcomes you, General Lou! I am pleased to see your triumphant return. You have brought glory and honor to our Great Jing!"

With a bright, resounding laugh, Lou Yue leaped down from the horse and returned the bow, hands cupped.

"Many thanks, Your Highness!"

Instantly, Jiang Suizhou could deduce from his response that they were quite unfamiliar with each other. His formal tone was a good indicator that he hadn't interacted much with the prince in the past. Maybe he'd even been so focused on the battlefield in recent months that nobody had brought him up to speed with the goings-on back home.

There was a good chance he didn't know that the newest addition to the Prince of Jing's harem was the disgraced General Huo Wujiu.

Jiang Suizhou finally allowed himself to relax a little. In turn, the smile on his face grew a bit more sincere, and he strode forward to place a hand on Lou Yue's arm.

As he did so, he seized the opportunity to give Lou Yue a swift once-over.

Tall and burly, Lou Yue bore a surprising resemblance to his historical portraits. He was in his forties, but he was still in his prime. Although being outside in the elements year-round caused him to have deeper wrinkles than most, it didn't make him look old at all. Rather, it made him seem even more steadfast.

“No need for such formalities, General.” Jiang Suizhou chuckled, withdrawing his gaze. “You’ve had a long, weary journey—you must be exhausted.”

Seeing the slight shift in the prince’s demeanor, Lou Yue seemed to relax as well. The prince’s expression was gentle, and unlike the other scholar-officials, his words concealed no thinly veiled barbs or infuriating riddles.

“Oh, I wouldn’t call it tiring,” Lou Yue said with a grin. “I’m used to being on horseback all day long. We weren’t in a rush to return to the capital either, so it was a breeze.”

Jiang Suizhou exchanged a few more pleasantries with him, offering him just the right amount of praise. The small talk wound down, and Jiang Suizhou returned to the matter at hand.

“I’m only here to give you a warm welcome back to the city, General,” he said. “Come, His Majesty has arranged a banquet in the palace, ready to reward you for your efforts. Once you’ve gotten your men in order, we can head into the city.”

Lou Yue nodded, but then he hesitated briefly.

“By any chance, has His Majesty said what’s to be done with my soldiers? All these men and horses cannot remain camped outside the city forever.”

Next it was Jiang Suizhou’s turn to pause awkwardly.

According to his modern understanding, Lou Yue was gradually stripped of his military authority following his return to the capital. Once the Ministry of War finished processing the soldiers under his command, they would be handed over to the Pang faction.

This was, of course, all part of the emperor’s plan. It was why he had Lou Yue return to Lin’an with his troops in tow in the first place.

After a brief silence, Jiang Suizhou decided to keep his response vague.

“According to His Majesty, the Ministry of War must complete a head count and assessment of the troops before the rewards can be distributed based on merit.”

He didn’t have any evidence right now; he was relying solely on the memories from his past life, which naturally wasn’t a viable form of proof. Moreover, this was his first time meeting Lou Yue. If he immediately tried to initiate a serious conversation with him, it would only end up arousing his suspicion.

With that in mind, he smiled and nodded at Lou Yue, then swept a look behind him.

The army moved slowly. Lou Yue’s eagerness had spurred him to arrive first.

The troops were only just now reaching the outskirts of Lin’an, their formation vast and imposing. Fifty thousand soldiers served under Lou Yue—a rather small number, comparatively—yet the sight of them marching still commanded awe and admiration.

Just then, out of nowhere, a white horse galloped toward them with light and graceful hoofbeats.

Its rider wasn’t in formation with the rest of the men. Dust billowed in their wake as they spurred the horse along, looking more like some sort of carefree wandering swordsman than a trained soldier. As they approached, it became increasingly apparent that their figure was unexpectedly slender and lithe beneath the heavy armor.

Was that…a woman…?

Jiang Suizhou’s fingers twitched, and his brows furrowed slightly.

In that case, it had to be her. It couldn’t be anyone else…

“Pardon her unruliness, Your Highness,” Lou Yue said with a huff of laughter. “This is my daughter; she goes by the name of Wanjun.”

Somewhere deep down, Jiang Suizhou sighed softly.

Of course it was Lou Wanjun.

But for some reason, that internal sigh failed to alleviate any tension whatsoever. On the contrary, his chest seemed to tighten with an inexplicable sense of stifling discomfort. Even his breathing slowed for a moment, as if he were being smothered by it.

Perhaps it was because of a certain someone who instantly came to mind when he heard that name.

After all, one man always appeared alongside her in history books: Huo Wujiu. They were the ultimate historical power couple, the stars of a classic, heartwarming love story. Essentially, they were a match made in heaven.

And what of the Prince of Jing? To Huo Wujiu, Jiang Suizhou was a living insult—a stain on his life to remind him of the torture and humiliation he'd endured in Southern Jing.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't stop his gaze from drifting toward Lou Wanjun.

Objectively speaking, she was indeed a beautiful young woman. She likely took after her mother in appearance, as she didn't share Lou Yue's stocky build or rough features. The shape of her brow was elegant and dashing, her eyes sharp yet delicate in a way that read as distinctly feminine.

Perhaps because she didn't have a traditional, sheltered upbringing, her complexion wasn't particularly pale. Her skin carried the sun-kissed hue of light wheat, a healthy glow that enhanced her beauty and added a touch of resilience.

Even more striking was her demeanor. She had a confident, carefree willfulness about her, cultivated from years on the battlefield, which Jiang Suizhou found made her feel unexpectedly similar to Huo Wujiu. Surely, if the two of them stood next to each other, they would be exceptionally eye-catching.

Jiang Suizhou tore his gaze away.

…What was the matter with him?

His current feelings were nothing more than wishful thinking on his part; he was well aware of that. Huo Wujiu had his own path to follow in life, after all. He would do all the things he was meant to do and meet all the people he was meant to meet.

As for Jiang Suizhou… He was just an ordinary person who'd inexplicably transmigrated here from the distant future. He'd only clung to

Huo Wujiu in a desperate bid for survival amid the chaos.

And so, even though the person whom Huo Wujiu was fated to encounter had arrived, Jiang Suizhou couldn't bring himself to feel a shred of happiness.

He knew he shouldn't think this way, but no amount of logic could suppress the dull ache that crept over him.

It was an ache he'd never experienced before, and it was quite difficult to bear. He wasn't even sure what he was struggling against, and yet it refused to loosen its grip on him.

Finally, he forced a thin smile.

"As expected, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," he remarked, keeping his voice as steady as he could. "I see General Lou's daughter is an outstanding young woman of remarkable talent."

Lou Yue was oblivious to sensitive matters such as this, and he didn't pick up on Jiang Suizhou's abnormal behavior. He simply waved his hand and groaned at the compliment.

"What remarkable talent?" he said with undisguised exasperation. "She's only like this because she grew up untamed in the army after her mother passed away early. Now she's about to be seventeen or eighteen, yet she can't even find herself a match! Now that I've returned to the capital, I want to keep this girl in Lin'an for a while—have her learn some of those feminine arts like embroidery, or at least the four arts[2] in general. Maybe then she'll be a bit more ladylike."

Then the general chuckled and gave Jiang Suizhou a sly glance.

"I'll have to ask Your Highness to keep an eye out for me. I don't suppose you know any sons of noble families looking for a bride? Or really, any promising young, unmarried men in general. I'm not too picky…"

Jiang Suizhou's smile grew strained.

He wanted to assure Lou Yue that he needn't worry about his daughter—with fate guiding the way, no matchmakers were necessary. But when he opened his mouth, nothing came out. Meng Qianshan, who was standing nearby, quickly noticed something was amiss.

"Your Highness?" he said, taking a step forward to steady him.

Jiang Suizhou lowered his head and laughed. Seizing the opportunity presented, he allowed Meng Qianshan to support him and leaned into his best built-in excuse.

“My health is poor. Please excuse me, General.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine!” Lou Yue said with another wave of his hand. “It’s going to take a good while to call the troops to order. If Your Highness isn’t feeling well, feel free to get some rest!”

Smiling faintly, Jiang Suizhou nodded and left with the help of Meng Qianshan.

In admitting his delusional infatuation, he realized he’d also become unexpectedly petty. He found himself unable to even talk to Miss Lou face-to-face.

He was but a cuckoo occupying a magpie’s nest—an uncertain usurper who didn’t know his place.

Meanwhile, the young lady clad in armor nimbly dismounted from her horse, accompanied by its clear, resounding whinny. After dusting off her hands, she handed the reins to one of the imperial guards waiting nearby.

“Hm? Father, why did that gentleman leave?” she asked, puzzled.

She threw an appraising glance at Jiang Suizhou’s carriage.

“He’s quite good-looking, though he didn’t seem too happy. Don’t tell me he’s another enemy you made in the imperial court, Father?”

Gnashing his teeth, Lou Yue jabbed his finger at her forehead.

“What are you saying?! He wasn’t feeling well and he went back to rest, that’s all,” he growled. After a pause, he added a warning: “Don’t you go setting your sights on him either. He’s a cut-sleeve.”

“What do you mean by that?” Lou Wanjun laughed. “Cut-sleeve or not, he’s handsome—that’s the truth. Can’t I praise him?”

“Why must you praise him?! It’s unbecoming of a lady!” Lou Yue retorted, filled with ire. “Listen to me when I tell you to watch what you say here! The capital is different from the army encampment; you can’t just say

whatever comes to mind! If you keep speaking with such little restraint, how are you going to—”

“Find a husband in the future! I know,” Lou Wanjun interrupted, finishing the rest of his sentence for him. “All right, got it. My ears are going to grow calluses at this rate.”

Lou Yue scowled furiously. “I’m your father. Don’t treat my words like a joke!”

With a snort, Lou Wanjun gave his shoulder a nonchalant pat. Her response was perfunctory.

“I know, I know. It’s not a joke,” she said languidly, an unconcerned smile on her lips. Her voice lilted up at the end of the sentence, light and breezy, like the wings of the wild geese sweeping across the desert skies.

“Okay now,” she prompted abruptly. “Hurry up and review your troops. Let’s not keep that delicate young gentleman waiting.”

Chapter 76

As the official in charge of welcoming Lou Yue outside the city, Jiang Suizhou was required to escort him all the way back to the palace. After that, he would also be expected to attend the welcome banquet with the guest of honor.

By the time Lou Yue finished his head count, the sky had already begun to darken. At long last, the court officials boarded their carriages, and on horseback, a handful of soldiers accompanied them—including Lou Yue, his daughter, and several of his commanding officers. This grand procession made its way to the palace, where the Kaiyang Gate swept open to admit them.

The atmosphere at the banquet started out rather reserved and cautious. Even though Jiang Suizhou wasn't a very high-ranking official, he was the reigning emperor's only surviving brother, as well as the only imperial prince. By assigning him the task of welcoming Lou Yue, the emperor appeared to be putting on quite a show of respect for the returning general. At first, no one could figure out what the emperor was thinking, so all the officials present remained more guarded than usual around Lou Yue.

Of course, the emperor hadn't put half the thought into it that they had. He merely wanted to make one person he despised go welcome another person he despised. If he was lucky, perhaps they'd even get into an argument—the worse the fallout, the better.

And so, while the rest of the court officials speculated carefully about the emperor's intentions, the emperor only listlessly doled out slight praise to Lou Yue before allowing him and his daughter to enter the banquet.

Unfortunately, the emperor would only grow more and more displeased as the evening went on.

Lou Yue had always been the wildly arrogant type who never gave anyone the time of day. Not one person in the court enjoyed his leniency, not even Pang Shao.

But then the frail Prince of Jing had come out to greet him under the blazing sun and spoken to him with kind and genuine words. He'd lacked the cryptic, mocking attitude typical of other scholar-officials, and Lou Yue had taken note of it.

Halfway through the banquet, he stood up and toasted Jiang Suizhou.

Apart from the emperor, Lou Yue had never voluntarily wassailed another before.

Everyone else immediately exchanged glances, and they regarded Jiang Suizhou in a new light. On the throne, the emperor's face darkened.

Lou Yue commanded a significant military force, which meant he was potentially a very dangerous man. His ostracization in the court mitigated the danger somewhat, and his lack of connections meant the emperor could still use him without worry.

But now, things were different.

Almost instantaneously, the atmosphere at the banquet turned cold as ice. Jiang Suizhou looked over at Lou Yue appraisingly, trying to gauge his intent. It was clear from his calm, unbothered expression that this was a genuine act of friendship inspired by their meeting earlier.

But the people around him didn't know the mundane details of the welcoming ceremony; they were only aware of the fact that he and Lou Yue had suddenly grown closer.

Jiang Suizhou paused, a bit conflicted about what to do.

He watched as Lou Yue approached with his cup of wine. Then Jiang Suizhou also rose from his seat and quickly spoke before Lou Yue could say another word.

"How could I trouble General Lou to come over for a toast? I should be the one toasting you. This body of mine is weak and unreliable, resulting in a breach in etiquette outside the city today. I must ask you not to take offense, General…"

Then, to Lou Yue's horror, the Prince of Jing became racked by a terrible coughing fit in the middle of his sentence. It was so violent that a bit of wine splashed onto the table from the cup he still held in his hand.

Lou Yue was given a scare. He was surrounded by hale and hearty soldiers all day, every day. When was the last time he had come in contact with someone so sickly and pallid?

“What offense is there to take?” he replied quickly. “Your Highness is in poor health—you should rest more.”

With great difficulty, Jiang Suizhou managed to stop coughing long enough to tap his cup against Lou Yue’s, smiling lightly.

Internally, he let out a sigh of relief. This way, he could offer somewhat of an explanation for the doubts spinning through everyone’s minds.

At that moment, a voice leisurely floated over from the front tables.

“General Lou should indeed be giving His Highness, the Prince of Jing, a proper toast.”

It was Pang Shao.

Confusion flashed across Lou Yue’s face, and he turned to look at Pang Shao, who gave him a small smile before continuing in a slow, measured voice.

“Ah, I suppose General Lou might not be aware of this yet, but there was a joyous occasion in the Prince of Jing’s household earlier this year.”

In an instant, Jiang Suizhou’s feigned coughing turned genuine as he choked on a mouthful of wine.

He felt his heart lurch at those words. It went without saying that he knew what “joyous occasion” Pang Shao meant to reveal.

After all, General Lou still had no idea that the only son of his old friend had been married into the Prince of Jing’s household as a concubine.

Jiang Suizhou’s second violent coughing spell startled Meng Qianshan, who hurried over to pat his back for him. But Jiang Suizhou couldn’t be bothered with any of that—his heart was already in his throat.

Once Lou Yue heard about this matter, he would inevitably be furious. Who knew what he would do in response? Regardless of what he did, however, that fury would undoubtedly be directed at Jiang Suizhou.

With great and strenuous effort, he quelled his coughing and then drew a deep breath. He could only await the arrival of the storm.

Appearing perplexed, Lou Yue asked, “What joyous occasion?”

Pang Shao glanced at Jiang Suizhou before turning his gaze back to Lou Yue. With an enigmatic chuckle, he fell silent.

For once, the emperor’s mood took a turn for the better. Sitting at the head of the table, he pushed down his misgivings and displeasure from earlier and shot Pang Shao a look of satisfaction.

A handful of officials from the Pang faction snickered and picked up where Pang Shao left off.

“General Lou, haven’t you heard?” one of them crowed. “General Huo Wujiu, only son of the late Marquis of Dingbei, has embarked upon a beautiful journey alongside His Highness, the Prince of Jing!”

Laughter rippled across the banquet hall.

“General Huo? Surely you mean *Madam* Huo?” another official added, grinning.

Lou Yue froze, absolutely dumbstruck. It took a good while for him to finally snap out of his daze.

Because he’d been in Lingnan at the beginning of the year, Lou Yue was well aware of Huo Wujiu’s defeat in battle. Still…defeat was one thing, but such humiliation was another matter entirely.

He stared at Jiang Suizhou in disbelief.

If you asked about the Prince of Jing, everyone across the land could tell you that he was a cut-sleeve, but beyond that…what else was there?

The Prince of Jing gazed back at him, pale as a ghost with features beautiful enough to belong to a woman. The eunuch at his side supported him, as if a gust of wind might be enough to topple him over. To top it all off, his eyes glistened with a few unshed tears brought about by his earlier coughing fit. As they locked gazes in the glowing lamplight, the Prince of Jing came across as unexpectedly and undeniably pitiful.

Lou Yue seethed with anger.

He’d only exchanged a few words with the Prince of Jing today, but that was enough to judge at least some of the prince’s personal character. Considering that interaction alongside the way Pang Shao was acting right now, it seemed abundantly clear who had actually devised such a malicious method of humiliation.

Lou Yue’s eyes sharpened into a vicious glare. An involuntary shiver rocked over Jiang Suizhou…but then Lou Yue swiveled around. At over six feet tall, he loomed over the entire court like a mountain as he stared straight at Pang Shao.

“Pang Shao, you old wretch! I always knew you were callous, but I never imagined you could be this wicked! Are you truly so petty as to drag your political grievances into a harem?!”

His voice thundered violently from him, abrasive and full-throated. It echoed harshly through the dazzling, resplendent hall like the tolling of a great bell, causing all the officials to jolt in alarm.

It was enough to even give Pang Shao pause.

He opened his mouth, but just as he was about to say something, Lou Yue resumed shouting righteously over him once more.

“Are you proud of this? Do you see your conduct as honorable?” he raged. “Victory in battle deserves honor; taking back Yecheng deserves pride! To go and marry a prisoner of war to a prince— Either kill him or release him! Or are you waiting for the people to commend your brilliance and to curse Huo Wujiu’s incompetence and cowardice first?

“The cowardly and incompetent one here is you, Pang Shao! You’ve brought great shame upon not just yourself and His Majesty but all of Great Jing! Don’t you scholar-officials want nothing more than for your name to go down in history? Believe it or not, in a millennium or two, you’ll be mocked as a despicable villain for your utterly unscrupulous tactics and heinous treatment of prisoners of war!”

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Huo Wujiu had long since tossed that thick, sturdy willow branch out the window.

As night approached, Wei Kai hurried into his room.

“There’s something I need to tell you, General.”

Huo Wujiu glanced over to see Wei Kai pull a minuscule letter out of his sleeve. It had been rolled up into a tiny scroll, most likely delivered by a messenger bird.

“This is the reply from Li Sheng, the commanding officer guarding the northern bank of the Yangtze River,” Wei Kai said.

Huo Wujiu made a noise of acknowledgment as he took the letter from Wei Kai and unfurled it.

The characters were written in exceptionally tiny regular script.[3] Even at miniature scale, each brushstroke contained an irrepressible tremor that rendered it a bit illegible, as if the sender found himself overcome with emotion while writing it.

In fact, several tears had landed on the paper, smudging some of the writing. Despite all this, the lengthy letter was still wholly readable.

Huo Wujiu swiftly skimmed it.

The content was earnest and sincere, and the writer’s excitement poured out with every word.

Li Sheng expressed his delight at Huo Wujiu’s unexpected reunion with Wei Kai, and how he always knew that the general undoubtedly had a fighting chance of recovery. Not a day went by without him remembering General Huo’s instructions and teachings, and he fully committed himself to the defense of Jiangbei’s border on his behalf. Should Huo Wujiu wish to make any moves, he need only give Li Sheng the word. So long as the general gave the command, Li Sheng would obey and deploy troops accordingly, all in anticipation of the general’s return.

Huo Wujiu read over the letter twice before slowly lowering it.

He didn’t speak.

Seeing that he was finished, Wei Kai quickly filled the silence.

“General, we’ve never even worked with this Li Sheng fellow before, yet he’s so warmhearted and passionate! This works well for us too. Once we seize the chance to leave Lin’an and get to the edge of the Yangtze River, it seems we won’t have to worry about anything else. We can immediately advance south!”

Huo Wujiu lowered his gaze. His face was expressionless almost to the point of seeming impassive as he brushed his fingers over the dried tearstains on the paper. A few seconds later, he let out a quiet laugh.

“Indeed. In fact, I’ve only ever seen him a couple of times.”

And yet this man—who had never even spoken to him before and who wasn’t his subordinate—was so moved that his outpouring of emotion caused his handwriting to suffer?

It was difficult to judge if the tears staining the page were genuine or something squeezed out by the writer for show.

Another moment passed. Then with a twitch of his fingers, Huo Wujiu crushed the letter in his palm.

“…General?” Wei Kai gave him a puzzled look.

Huo Wujiu opened his hand, his expression inscrutable. The snow-white scraps of paper scattered across the floor.

“Don’t respond yet. Let’s wait a bit,” he said.

“But…”

Huo Wujiu glanced up at Wei Kai, who gaped at him incredulously, astonishment written across his face.

He knew what Wei Kai was thinking. These days, Huo Wujiu could come and go from the Prince of Jing’s residence as though it were deserted. It would be incredibly easy for him to swiftly escape Lin’an with his subordinates and head back to Northern Liang.

Now that they had established contact with Jiangbei’s commanding officer, leaving right now could be considered the easiest and most foolproof strategy.

But could they truly take this officer at his word?

There were still some nagging, unanswered questions that left Huo Wujiu apprehensive about what exactly had gone so wrong during the river crossing at the beginning of the year. It was highly likely that there was some hidden agenda they were unaware of. Based on his current suspicions…not even his cousin's men could be fully trusted.

Nor could he actually place his trust in Li Sheng.

However, it wasn't a good idea to tell Wei Kai about these convoluted conjectures. Wei Kai was blunt by nature, often lost his composure, and tended to think in a very straightforward manner. If he found out about this, more issues were sure to follow.

With that in mind, Huo Wujiu glanced over at Wei Kai and smirked.

"No buts. Don't read too much into it," he said. "You know I like to take the more thrilling approach, so why not let Li Sheng wait a little longer?"

A complicated look took over Wei Kai's face.

After a beat of silence, he sighed. "Your subordinate knows what's on your mind, General."

His face was somber, and his eyes carried a melancholy worry and the frustration of unmet expectations.

Huo Wujiu frowned. "What?"

Wei Kai heaved an anguished sigh.

"I know you refuse to leave until you win the Prince of Jing's heart, no matter what else happens! Isn't that right? Your subordinate understands. I will do as you command, General!"

His resolute demeanor—as if he were ready to embrace death—was more befitting of a devoted underling under the rule of an oppressive tyrant. Though he knew his misguided lord would bring ruin to the nation and its people, his unwavering loyalty forced him to grit his teeth and carry out whatever evil deeds were asked of him, like the accomplice to a man-eating tiger.

Chapter 77

HUO WUJIU STARED AT Wei Kai as he lowered his eyebrows. His lips parted, but he still didn't say anything.

As Wei Kai analyzed this reaction, he noticed a slight tightening in Huo Wujiu's cheeks, as if he were clenching his jaw. He certainly appeared to be rather displeased, but Wei Kai couldn't understand precisely why.

It was always difficult to tell what the general was thinking. Wei Kai felt a bit flummoxed.

After some hesitation, he asked tentatively, "General?"

In response, Huo Wujiu shot him an unreadable, ambiguous look.

"Got it!" Wei Kai immediately straightened up.

This had to be his general's subtle way of warning him not to run his mouth.

Of course! Suddenly, he understood. The manner of thought running through his general's mind couldn't be voiced out loud. It was hardly appropriate for Wei Kai to share.

It was already enough that he knew these thoughts existed.

Bearing that in mind, he gave Huo Wujiu an impish grin.

Following that fleeting glance, Huo Wujiu couldn't be bothered to figure out what kind of nonsense Wei Kai thought he had understood. In any case, he had more important matters to consider—he turned to look out the window and noted that even though it was already getting quite late, Jiang Suizhou still hadn't returned from the banquet.

"If you get it, then go check out the situation," Huo Wujiu said vaguely. "Leave me. I have matters to discuss with the Prince of Jing when he gets back."

Nodding repeatedly, Wei Kai withdrew from the room.

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At that moment, tensions were running high in the palace's banquet hall.

Literati who studied under the school of Confucius and Mencius generally understood the art of tact. No matter the occasion, they always found a way to let the other party save some face by discreetly expressing their true meaning. Thus, the court ministers had their own scholarly manner of interacting with one another. Even when they were diametrically opposed, they refrained from going so far as to trample over the other person's dignity.

But Lou Yue was different. He'd never studied those things. The principles of the literati made little sense to him.

After his tirade, a deafening silence fell over the entire hall. The rest of the officials waited with bated breath, all other conversation put on indefinite hold. Despite the atmosphere, Lou Yue continued to glare at Pang Shao.

For once, Pang Shao's expression looked somewhat unpleasant. He stared back at Lou Yue in silence for a few seconds before he begrudgingly spoke.

"Perhaps you've had a few too many glasses of wine, General Lou. Why aren't any servants coming over to help General Lou retire for the evening?"

Anyone else would understand that this was Pang Shao's attempt to not only preserve his dignity but issue a warning to Lou Yue.

However, Lou Yue refused to take the hint.

"Certainly not! My mind is very clear, I assure you," he scoffed loudly. "If I'd had too much to drink this evening, you'd know, for your head would be on the floor by now, you old bastard."

Pang Shao's face grew even darker.

In the glittering grandeur of the hall, the lavishly dressed officials exchanged looks and sneaked glances in his direction. Pang Shao had grown accustomed to being revered and catered to, and he couldn't bear this

kind of scrutiny. Flattening his hands against the table, he resisted the urge to leave the banquet.

Enough! He'd always known that he would have to get rid of this person one day. Now, without a shadow of a doubt, that time had come. He would show this boorish oaf just how gravely he'd overstepped, how messing with the wrong person would bring him suffering that culminated in a fate worse than death.

He clenched his teeth and didn't respond right away.

It was then that another voice rang out nearby.

"Seeing as this banquet is a celebration in honor of General Lou, perhaps it would be best to save other matters for a private discussion. Respectfully, General, I implore you to remember your manners in front of His Majesty. Now if you don't mind returning to your seat…"

Lou Yue looked over to see it was Qi Min speaking.

Despite Lou Yue's yearlong absence, he remembered the man well. Though he could sometimes be long-winded and irksome, he constantly stood up to Pang Shao. Partly for that reason, he and Lou Yue never really bothered each other.

So what exactly was that old windbag playing at here? What could've happened to make him cozy up to Pang Shao all of a sudden?

Witnessing Qi Min speak in favor of Pang Shao, Lou Yue lost what little respect he had for the man. He instantly rounded on Qi Min and began berating *him* instead.

"You're concerned about *my* manners, Minister?" he shouted derisively. "Well, I suppose this does fall under your jurisdiction as Grand Master of Ceremonies. Then let me ask you this: Is it considered proper etiquette for an imperial prince to marry a prisoner of war?"

Qi Min furrowed his brows. After another long look at Lou Yue, he sat back down and fell silent.

Lou Yue glowered at Pang Shao one more time before he tossed his cup aside and headed straight for the emperor himself. With perfect posture, he knelt and bowed in greeting.

“Your general has indeed been presumptuous tonight, but please think things over carefully, Your Majesty. Should Your Majesty find yourself beguiled by a scheming minister into doing some wicked act that undermines the authority of the imperial family, it would not be the minister’s honor and reputation that suffers—it would be Your Majesty’s.”

The emperor’s already unpleasant expression only twisted further.

Lou Yue was arrogantly impudent, but he had every right to be.

Hedonistic as he was, the emperor was well aware that Great Jing had no other talented generals. No matter how dissatisfied he was with Lou Yue, he didn’t dare to kill him.

Indeed, to the current court of Great Jing, Lou Yue represented their only solid line of defense.

With a twitch of his lips, the emperor forced out the briefest possible answer: “I understand.”

Lou Yue calmly stood up and returned to his seat.

The feast left all parties involved in a sour mood. As the scheduled end approached, the banquet concluded in an unceremonious rush.

Qi Min climbed into his horse-drawn carriage. Just as he was about to depart, one of his good friends suddenly flagged it down and squeezed into the carriage with him.

“What is it?”

Qi Min was getting up there in years. The wine he’d drunk was making him a bit dizzy, so he leaned against the wall for respite.

His friend sat down across from him and asked in bemusement, “Duke Qi, why did you say that at the banquet?”

Qi Min opened his eyes to look at him.

“Because Lou Yue truly overstepped his authority today, which upset His Majesty.”

This certainly didn’t sound like something Qi Min would say.

“Please do not jest with me, Duke Qi!”

“Mm, I wasn’t.”

He sat up straight and continued slowly, “You know as well as I do that General Lou isn’t one to mince his words. He’s brash and arrogant, as many generals are, but his arrogance isn’t driven by a sense of entitlement from his accomplishments. The reason he offended Pang Shao and displeased His Majesty this evening was because he was genuinely furious at the Grand Chancellor and worried for Great Jing.”

“That’s a given!” his friend said.

“He’s on thin ice already. Pang Shao won’t tolerate this behavior,” Qi Min sighed.

“You don’t mean…b-but Lou Yue is Great Jing’s only skilled general at present.”

Qi Min lowered his gaze.

“You and I may be concerned about that, but Pang Shao won’t be,” he countered grimly. “As I left the banquet, I stayed close to Pang Shao. Sure enough, when someone approached him to offer consolation, all Pang Shao said was this: ‘Let him be arrogant, for pride always comes before a fall.’ It was then that I knew I had guessed correctly.”

“So what do we do now?”

Seeing the growing panic on his companion’s face, Qi Min paused for a moment of contemplation.

“We do what we must. We cannot allow him to succeed,” he said in a measured tone. “I said what I did during the feast to publicly goad General Lou into a conflict with me, drawing a clear boundary between us. This way, Pang Shao may act with less caution. In fact, he may even try to gauge my intentions and make use of me—even in my old age, I am reasonably well connected in court. When the time comes, some telltale signs are sure to emerge. Whatever he intends to do will leave a trail we can follow, and we’ll have a way to thwart him then.”

His friend mulled over his words, then nodded in approval.

“Excellent plan, Duke Qi! I see you’re as ingenious as you are upstanding and just.”

Hearing that, Qi Min chuckled and shook his head.

“Ingenious? Hardly,” he said. “You see, something dawned on me after the Prince of Jing surreptitiously intervened on my behalf not long ago. I realized that when dealing with Pang Shao, I should learn how to retreat in order to advance.”

At the same time that Qi Min was having a relatively pleasant conversation with his good friend, faint grumbling and swearing could be heard coming from Lou Yue’s carriage.

Lou Wanjun sat on the side, laughing at him.

“Why are you so happy?!” Lou Yue was peeved.

“No reason,” Lou Wanjun answered, grinning. “It’s just…you were just so frank and outspoken today, Father. It was really satisfying to watch.”

“Merely berating him doesn’t do any good!” Lou Yue raged. “Not when that ridiculous deed has already been done. It’s such a pity…”

He trailed off. What was it he pitied most in this situation? The once-great imperial court, now reduced to this sorry state? Or the son of his old friend, whose suffering lay at the heart of the whole ordeal?

“A pity about Huo-dage[4]?” Lou Wanjun finished for him.

Lou Yue fell silent, his expression heavy.

It pained him to know he was letting down the Marquis of Dingbei, but his duty to the nation came first. As a general, he couldn’t try to take both sides simply because of some fraternal ties.

Still…the Marquis of Dingbei had died on the battlefield, and Lou Yue didn’t even know where he was buried. How could he just sit there and watch helplessly as his only son was maimed and forced into a life of misery, humiliation, and concubinage?

More than ever, Lou Yue felt torn.

It was then that Lou Wanjun laughed lightly next to him and patted his shoulder comfortingly.

“Chin up, Father. What’s done is done,” she consoled him. “In any case, the Prince of Jing doesn’t seem like a bad guy. I’m sure he won’t actually bring harm to Huo-dage.”

“You’ve only met him once,” Lou Yue snapped, shooting her a scathing look. “How do you know he’s a good person? Just because he’s handsome?”

“Of course not. I know you must agree, Father, or else you would have cursed him out today too.” Lou Wanjun paused, then couldn’t help but add, “Though…he really is quite handsome.”

“That still doesn’t mean they can marry that boy off to him!”

“Now you’re just worrying too much,” Lou Wanjun said soothingly. “As long as he’s alive, a bit of disgrace is nothing. Besides, just because you find the prospect unappealing doesn’t mean that Huo-dage is unwilling…”

“What utter nonsense!”

“Nonsense? Come on, it’s not like Huo-dage is blind! I mean, who let the Prince of Jing be so good-looking?”

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Even though it wasn’t actually that late by the time Jiang Suizhou returned to the residence, he was still exhausted, both physically and mentally.

It had been a truly hectic day, and the commotion at the evening banquet had only drained his energy further.

Lou Yue was indeed a loyal, esteemed general, not to mention an extremely good person—but Jiang Suizhou still couldn’t stop worrying about him.

According to the historical records, Lou Yue was denied the honor of falling in battle. Instead, he was betrayed by his fellow officials, stripped of his military authority, and eventually beheaded on the orders of his own ruler. Evidently, Pang Shao had been conspiring to get rid of him for a while.

Lou Yue’s blunt honesty didn’t help. He acted as though he had no fear of making enemies for himself.

It all left Jiang Suizhou feeling intensely uneasy. He feared that Pang Shao would actually try to kill Lou Yue after that incident at the banquet. Then Lou Yue would meet a tragic end, and he himself would be left with absolutely no peace of mind.

His head ached; he was already somewhat tipsy since he'd drunk some wine. He was carried back to Anyin Hall in the sedan chair, wanting nothing more than to get some rest so he could continue making plans the next day.

But just as he reached the courtyard, he saw a tall, slender figure waiting at the gate, staring intently in his direction.

Jiang Suizhou peered closer and realized it was Wei Kai.

"What are you doing here?"

As he stepped down from the sedan chair, Wei Kai approached him with a friendly smile.

"Your Highness, our gen—I mean, our madam has something he wishes to discuss with you, if you wouldn't mind coming over."

Jiang Suizhou made a noise of acknowledgment and followed him to Huo Wujiu's room.

He inhaled deeply.

There could only be one reason Huo Wujiu wanted to talk: It had to be about Lou Yue. And along those same lines…if he truly considered Jiang Suizhou a friend, he might even bring up Lou Wanjun.

Jiang Suizhou told himself it didn't matter; this was the natural course of things. The only things that didn't fit into the plan were his deluded fantasies, which he needed to overcome on his own.

He arrived to find Huo Wujiu sitting in the front room, drinking tea. When he heard Jiang Suizhou enter, he glanced up at him with those deep, dark eyes.

Under the weight of Huo Wujiu's gaze, all the weariness that Jiang Suizhou had accumulated throughout the day abruptly washed over him, causing the tip of his nose to sting a little.

He had no clue where this fatigue was coming from. All he knew was that right now, everything felt exhausting and unfair. These emotions surged through him powerfully, and he struggled to hold them back.

Then again, most people tended to become too sensitive and overthink things when they drank too much, right?

He sat down in the chair across from Huo Wujiu, who dismissed Wei Kai with a wave of his hand.

“Have you been drinking?” Huo Wujiu asked as the door closed.

Jiang Suizhou blinked, startled.

Even with all the mental preparation he’d done on the way here, he hadn’t expected this to be Huo Wujiu’s opening question to him.

He opened his mouth, only for his voice to come out small and feeble.

“…A tiny bit,” he said.

Chapter 78

HUO WUJIU LOOKED AT HIM silently for a moment before exhaling slowly.

"I wasn't trying to lecture you." He stood up and tested the temperature of the teapot on the table. Afterward, he poured a cup of tea and placed it by Jiang Suizhou's hand.

"So, I heard earlier today that Lou Yue is back?" Huo Wujiu asked.

Jiang Suizhou's fingers twitched as though he meant to pick up the cup, but at the mention of Lou Yue's name, he put his hand back down.

He was feeling quite conflicted.

Lou Yue was one of Southern Jing's few faithful and exceptional generals. Even if the great state of Southern Jing were to collapse, Jiang Suizhou still couldn't bear to see Lou Yue walk the path laid out for him to die at Pang Shao's hands.

He wished to save Lou Yue.

But somehow, hearing Huo Wujiu inquire about him made a subtle discomfort well up in his chest until it was almost suffocating.

"Yes. I left the city this morning to meet him," he answered. After a pause, he glanced at Huo Wujiu and inexplicably added, "His daughter, Lou Wanjun, was also with him."

Jiang Suizhou didn't realize, as he gazed up at Huo Wujiu with quiet, anxious eyes that glistened wetly under the soft lamplight, that he came across as more than a little pathetic.

But it didn't escape Huo Wujiu's notice. Caught by surprise, as if something had crashed gently into his heart, he felt the corners of his mouth quirk involuntarily upward in response.

Clearly, it was safe to assume that Jiang Suizhou wasn't entirely sober, which would explain both his odd expression and sluggish speech.

Fully preoccupied with observing Jiang Suizhou, Huo Wujiu replied without thinking much of what exactly he was saying.

"Hm? Must've been a pain in the neck for Lou Yue to drag her back from the frontier, then."

He wore a smile and spoke breezily, but in Jiang Suizhou's eyes, this response took on a completely different meaning.

All Jiang Suizhou had done was mention Lou Wanjun in passing… and yet Huo Wujiu had immediately smiled.

Jiang Suizhou told himself that this was how it should be. They were childhood friends with a deep bond of trust; this was only right.

"Her temper isn't great, and she likes to get into fights with people," Huo Wujiu obliviously tacked on. "She can be even more unreasonable than her father. She didn't bully you today, did she?"

There was a sudden sting in Jiang Suizhou's nose at the sound of Huo Wujiu's familiar, light tone of voice.

It's my own fault, he thought. How could he just develop feelings for Huo Wujiu, without rhyme or reason?

He didn't want to hear him talk about this any longer. He only wanted to hurry back to his room and go to sleep, so he could sober up.

Jiang Suizhou coughed a little. Instead of answering Huo Wujiu's question, he changed the subject. "You wanted to talk to me about Lou Yue, correct?"

At that, Huo Wujiu also shelved the casual conversation and sat down next to Jiang Suizhou.

"Yes," he said. "I made some plans today, and I wanted to run them by you."

Muddleheaded from standing in the wind, not to mention tipsy, Jiang Suizhou did his best to appear agreeable on the surface. Though he nodded politely, deep down, he thought to himself: *When Lou Wanjun is brought up, he smiles and jokes about her temper. But with me, it's just right down to business, huh?*

As soon as the jealousy swelled inside him, it couldn’t be bottled back up.

And yet Huo Wujiu was completely oblivious.

“He brought back fifty thousand soldiers with him this time. It’s a sizable number, but even if I’m able to bring them under my command, it will be difficult to achieve my goal in a short amount of time. If Pang Shao can muster up the troops, they’ll end up in a deadlock, so it’s a bit of a tricky situation.”

Jiang Suizhou hummed in agreement.

“However,” Huo Wujiu continued, “this is the only way. Those fifty thousand soldiers are currently stationed outside the city, and sending them away quickly would be difficult. If I can persuade Lou Yue to defect to our side in the upcoming weeks, we should be able to devise a way to swiftly encircle Lin’an and stage an insurrection. Then I’ll directly kill Pang Shao and Jiang Shunheng within the city walls, so the people won’t have to suffer through a war.”

His tone was earnest, his brows drawing together subconsciously as he tapped and traced out shapes on the surface of the table. Jiang Suizhou nodded from time to time and appeared to be listening attentively.

But when Huo Wujiu looked over at him, he could tell that his mind was wandering elsewhere.

The delicate fragrance of wine lingered faintly in the air. Even though Jiang Suizhou didn’t seem like he was actually drunk, his gaze was unfocused.

Huo Wujiu had never seen him like this.

While the Prince of Jing had always been charming—adorable, even, in a way that only he seemed to notice—he was never, *ever* careless, especially when it came to serious matters. For him to act so unlike himself today… Something must have happened, something of greater consequence than what they were talking about now.

Huo Wujiu frowned, the look on his face growing solemn.

“Did something happen today?” he suddenly asked.

Jiang Suizhou nodded again, clearly not paying attention to the question.

Huo Wujiu stopped talking. It took several seconds of complete silence for Jiang Suizhou to snap out of his daze.

When he noticed, he quickly focused on Huo Wujiu. “Hm?”

By this point, Huo Wujiu’s expression had become quite grave, indeed. His deeply furrowed brow signaled a storm was brewing, and he seemed to be on the verge of true anger.

“What happened?” he demanded.

Jiang Suizhou was a bit intimidated by the intensity of Huo Wujiu’s stare, and he couldn’t help but shiver slightly.

“Nothing happened,” he answered sincerely.

…Liar.

Strangely enough, Huo Wujiu felt a flash of irritation, and his eyebrows knitted even tighter together.

Had someone given Jiang Suizhou trouble while he was out today? But there was no word from Huo Wujiu’s men within the city. He hadn’t heard even the slightest whisper.

Was it something that took place in the palace?

“Be honest with me,” Huo Wujiu said sternly.

As far as Jiang Suizhou was concerned, he hadn’t been lying at all. He was truly a bit clueless as to why Huo Wujiu would ask him such a question out of the blue.

Slightly lost, he mulled over Huo Wujiu’s words for a good while before something finally dawned on him.

Huo Wujiu was trying to ask him about what happened in the palace today, wasn’t he? In that case, the only matter of real significance was Lou Yue loudly denouncing Pang Shao. That had to be it.

The wine had gone to his head, allowing these messy little feelings to cloud his judgment. How could he forget something so important? No wonder Huo Wujiu was upset with him. He must have been worried about Lou Yue, yet here Jiang Suizhou was, seemingly playing dumb…

“There was indeed an incident at the banquet,” Jiang Suizhou explained. “The short version is that General Lou singled out Pang Shao and openly rebuked him. Pang Shao didn’t retaliate at the time, but he had an awful look on his face. Then His Majesty commanded that his troops remain stationed outside the city, awaiting the next deployment—likely because they fear General Lou’s military strength. This all leads me to worry that Pang Shao may take action sooner rather than later…”

The longer Huo Wujiu listened, the deeper the grooves of his frown grew.

This was all insignificant and useless. If Pang Shao really intended to do something to Lou Yue, it would actually be a good opportunity for Huo Wujiu to step in and incite Lou Yue to defect.

Huo Wujiu thought it was clear that he was asking Jiang Suizhou if he’d been wronged today in some way. It was infuriating how he kept dodging the question and changing the subject in that slow, soft, aggravating tone of voice that induced a mix of pity and mounting anxiety.

He spoke abruptly, cutting off Jiang Suizhou.

“Was I asking you about that?” he snapped. “What in the world is wrong with you today?”

In a surge of frustration, Huo Wujiu lost control over his tone, and the words came out harsher than usual. For a moment, Jiang Suizhou felt the full weight of his imposing presence, forged from many years of commanding armies.

Startled by the sudden interjection, Jiang Suizhou found his shoulders trembling.

“…Wh-what?”

***

That evening was the first time they had ever parted on such a sour note.

After his outburst, Huo Wujiu stared at him, brows furrowed. Jiang Suizhou just lowered his eyes and mumbled that he'd had a bit too much to drink, then got up and left in a hurry.

The evening breeze made heat well up behind his eyes, yet his body was cold.

Huo Wujiu had never been this harsh with him before. What made him suddenly lose his temper? Although…it shouldn't have been a big deal, either way. Even in ordinary circumstances, friends inevitably argued when they were together long enough. Jiang Suizhou never used to let trivial things like this get to him in the past.

Even so, he couldn't help but feel aggrieved. The ache only deepened with the knowledge that there was no way his feelings could be reciprocated and that he'd soon have to watch him fall in love with someone else.

No matter how much he yearned, his desires would remain confined to the realm of his own wishful thinking.

When Jiang Suizhou returned to the main hall, even Meng Qianshan could tell that something was amiss. His Highness was already mentally and emotionally drained from all the things that had happened today. Given his current expression, Meng Qianshan assumed his parting with Madam Huo must not have been cordial either.

However, he didn't dare to ask any questions. Once he finished helping Jiang Suizhou get ready for bed, he dismissed the rest of the servants from the room before withdrawing as well.

The door slid shut, only leaving behind a hollow silence.

Lying in bed, Jiang Suizhou couldn't fall asleep.

He attempted to will himself to sleep, to no avail. The night gradually deepened. Quite a while later, he sighed in resignation and opened his eyes.

A brocade canopy came into view, adorned with pearls and nephrite; faint candlelight glinted off the carved bedposts.

His eyes followed the candlelight, only to see the daybed sitting under the window.

It really wasn’t particularly spacious, was it? When Huo Wujiu slept on it, he had to bend his legs and scrunch himself up a bit, just to fit his tall frame.

In some ways, things were better back then. Huo Wujiu had ignored him and worn a cold expression all day long, and Jiang Suizhou had cautiously kept his distance. They’d coexisted peacefully. Most importantly, he hadn’t had all these messy, convoluted feelings to untangle—at least, certainly not to the point where he’d lose sleep over Huo Wujiu using a somewhat stern tone of voice with him.

But…

But that night in the mountains, the stars were beautiful in a way he’d never seen before.

And Huo Wujiu’s smile had been truly dazzling.

Since there was no one else around, he finally allowed himself to stare at that daybed without restraint. He no longer needed to care about what kind of expression was on his face as he did so.

At that moment, however, the candles flickered.

Suddenly, there were two extremely quiet taps against his window frame, causing him to jolt in alarm.

“Who’s there?” he called out.

The wavering candle flames outlined a person’s blurry silhouette against the paper of the window screen.

“Me.” The voice was low and soft.

Jiang Suizhou instantly recognized it as belonging to Huo Wujiu.

“It’s so late,” he said, startled. “What are you doing here?”

“Open the window,” said Huo Wujiu.

Jiang Suizhou hesitated, wrestling with the urge to bury his head in the sand once more.

“I’m already in bed,” he deflected quietly, giving up the fight.

There was silence outside the window.

A few seconds later, Jiang Suizhou slowly rolled over and closed his eyes again. Just as he settled into a comfortable position, the window was abruptly opened from outside with a jarring *whoosh*.

Jiang Suizhou's eyes shot open. He bolted upright in bed to stare wide-eyed as Huo Wujiu braced one hand against the bottom of the window and leaped into the room. Immediately after, the window swung shut once more. He stood openly and brazenly in Jiang Suizhou's bedroom, dressed in a simple, unlined robe.

"Why did you come here at this hour?" Jiang Suizhou said urgently. "What if someone saw you and—"

As he spoke, he moved to get out of bed, but Huo Wujiu swiftly walked over and pushed him back down under the blankets.

"The floor is too cold to get up. Lie down. You…" Huo Wujiu paused, struggling with something too awkward to say aloud. A moment later, he sighed, as though conceding. "Did I wake you up?" he said. "There's no helping it—I couldn't sleep. Did I scare you just now?"

Jiang Suizhou opened his mouth but didn't speak.

Huo Wujiu sat down on the edge of his bed and looked down at him, flattening his hand against the blanket.

"I wasn't upset with you, you know," he said. "Why'd you run off? Do you really have so little courage that— I mean, you're acting like I did something bad to you."

"No, I didn't—" Jiang Suizhou started to deny it, but Huo Wujiu steamrolled him with his rambling.

"I was just a bit concerned because you were absent-minded the entire night. Did someone give you trouble earlier today? But then why couldn't you just tell me? Even if it's something I can't make right, do you really think keeping it to yourself is going to help?"

Chapter 79

HEAT PRICKED in Jiang Suizhou’s eyes.

The lighting was very dim in the room, and under that faint lamplight, Huo Wujiu gazed at him with those intensely dark eyes, calm and earnest.

It gave him a sense of security that he found difficult to describe. Not only that, it also made him believe that Huo Wujiu cared just as deeply about him.

That wasn’t entirely an illusion, though. After all, their friendship had reached a point where they were more like close confidants. It was just that Jiang Suizhou veered off course and complicated things by developing feelings that he shouldn’t have.

Jiang Suizhou didn’t respond immediately.

The silence only increased Huo Wujiu’s anxiety.

He wasn’t as composed as he appeared to be. Truthfully, he’d never had trouble falling asleep before in his life until now.

Only now did he discover that even in a comfortable bed, a person could still toss and turn endlessly, as if lying on a bed of nails. His thoughts raced in futile circles, and his eyes remained wide open as he pored over his memory of their conversation. Had he said something wrong earlier? Or had Jiang Suizhou truly encountered something so troublesome that he hadn’t even dared speak of it?

This mix of concern and confusion left him feeling incredibly uneasy and restless, like he was on pins and needles.

But at that point, Jiang Suizhou had already left. All the doors and windows of the main hall were tightly shut, and, under the darkness of the night, the entire world seemed quiet and tranquil. Even Meng Qianshan could be seen leaning against one of the columns in the corridor, dozing off.

Not Huo Wujiu, though.

Only Huo Wujiu understood how arduous his self-imposed torment had been and the sheer determination it'd taken for him to finally roll over and sit up. Without even changing his clothes, he sneaked over to knock on Jiang Suizhou's window…only for Jiang Suizhou to immediately become unresponsive to his questions.

Huo Wujiu's heart lodged itself even higher in his throat.

He hadn't treated him that badly, had he? Or…maybe he had? Maybe he'd gotten so used to conversing with Wei Kai on the daily that he spoke to Jiang Suizhou as if he had the same thick skin. In a moment of panic, he'd been indelicate…and now…

Suddenly, Jiang Suizhou spoke.

"It's nothing really," he mumbled weakly. He didn't sound confident about that in the slightest.

Huo Wujiu gazed unwaveringly at Jiang Suizhou. His eyes, though their shape gave the impression of a trickster fox spirit, held such genuine sweetness and innocence that it was difficult for Huo Wujiu to say anything too harsh to him.

Jiang Suizhou lifted his head and looked back at him. He seemed to mull over his words for some time before he continued.

"Today was tiring, that's all," he said. "I had to stand in the wind for a while when I was outside the city. And then with all the commotion at the banquet…it was all a bit stressful."

Huo Wujiu didn't quite believe him, but his tone softened noticeably. He spoke as if he were cautiously cradling a delicate flower, afraid of damaging it.

"That was it?" he asked.

Jiang Suizhou nodded. "And I'm a bit worried about General Lou."

"You don't need to worry about him," Huo Wujiu blurted out quickly.

"But have you ever considered that General Lou could be killed by Pang Shao at any moment, now that he's made an enemy of him?" Jiang Suizhou asked very seriously.

Huo Wujiu lifted an eyebrow slightly, never once breaking eye contact with him.

“So this is why you were so distracted earlier?”

“…Yes,” Jiang Suizhou lied, grateful that the darkness concealed the flush spreading across his earlobes.

Huo Wujiu let out a quiet huff that sounded like something between a laugh and a sigh of relieved joy.

“You’re so silly.” He pressed his hand against the top of Jiang Suizhou’s head and stroked his hair a few times, like he was petting an animal. “Why are you so fond of worrying about other people’s problems?”

Jiang Suizhou meekly said nothing.

“Don’t worry so much,” Huo Wujiu continued. “You think I’d let something like that happen? Not a chance. Not unless I was still locked up in prison, both legs maimed, unable to make any contact with the outside world. Even if Pang Shao had three heads and six arms, even if he were all-powerful—I swear to you, if I allow him to kill Lou Yue right under my nose, I’ll take Pang Shao’s surname as my own.”

Jiang Suizhou nodded, appearing exceptionally well-behaved and docile in Huo Wujiu’s eyes.

Huo Wujiu grinned. It had definitely been a smart decision to come here tonight.

Now, he could get a good night’s sleep.

“Does that put your mind at ease?” he asked.

Jiang Suizhou nodded again.

Huo Wujiu hummed in reply. “I’ll head back, then?”

“Don’t let anyone see you,” Jiang Suizhou reminded him softly.

Huo Wujiu knew what he meant by that, obviously. No one could know that his leg injuries had fully healed, nor that he could move relatively freely through the compound. But in that moment, those words gained a hint of romantic charm, like the two of them were having a secret love affair.

The thought made him almost childishly giddy with excitement.

He stood up. Before leaving, he looked back at Jiang Suizhou one last time.

“Stop fretting for no reason. Just go to sleep.”

He only turned back around after Jiang Suizhou agreed. Then he leaped back out through the window and left.

This time around, he seemed to carry himself with more ease, as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders; his movements were lighter than when he’d first arrived.

Jiang Suizhou watched him go. Huo Wujiu closed the window behind him, and the room fell quiet once more.

As Jiang Suizhou lay back down in bed, he let out a long sigh.

He should be happy.

In the original version of history, Huo Wujiu was confined to the prince’s harem and kept under strict watch. Presumably, this was what gave Pang Shao the opportunity to gradually seize Lou Yue’s military authority and ultimately take the general’s life.

Thanks to the choices Jiang Suizhou had made thus far, Lou Yue was no longer necessarily doomed to the same fate in this version.

And then…what about Huo Wujiu and Lou Wanjun?

Wherever their paths might now lead, no matter what happened between them, Jiang Suizhou knew he should only be a silent, invisible bystander.

So why couldn't he seem to keep his distance? He felt ashamed of himself for craving the warmth that Huo Wujiu brought him. For the first time, his rationality failed him, and he wanted nothing more than to keep everything the same. He'd gloss over the truth again and again, however many times it took, just to keep his spot at Huo Wujiu's side.

Because there was nowhere else in this world he'd rather be.

***

All the local officials of the Jing dynasty who were "in the know" understood what it meant to cross the threshold of the Pang residence.

Other than the emperor, Grand Chancellor Pang Shao was the most influential person in the land. In fact, even the emperor listened to the Grand Chancellor. Sometimes, the Grand Chancellor's will became the emperor's will in the blink of an eye.

With the Grand Chancellor's favor, all things were possible—and any official who could get their foot in the door had a shot at gaining it.

Historically, almost everyone who earned the opportunity to deliver their silver to Pang Shao's residence left feeling happy and satisfied. After all, money made the world go round. There was no greater miracle worker.

For the right price, the wise and honorable Grand Chancellor might find himself moved to speak on behalf of a most generous donor.

Late one evening, a plain and unassuming carriage arrived at the Pang residence. Despite the hour, the manor still glowed with lamplight.

The carriage remained parked in front of the gates for quite a long time. It was midnight by the time a man finally emerged from the residence

and slipped into the carriage, a gleeful look on his face.

"How did it go?" asked the man who'd been awaiting his return.

"It's done," answered the first man, smiling so broadly that his eyes squinted slightly.

Astonishment flitted across the other man's face, then swiftly resolved into pure elation.

"It actually worked?" he asked, delighted. "This is a grave offense, severe enough to get the entire family beheaded! I can't believe it…the Grand Chancellor was still willing to proceed?"

The man chuckled.

"It's partially because we've got luck on our side, and we caught him at the right moment," he said.

"How so?"

"Haven't you heard? Some time ago, His Majesty and Minister Pang had a bit of a falling-out. These days, it's hard to say if Minister Pang is trying to win back His Majesty's favor or if he's simply looking for a way out. Either way, he's in such dire financial straits that he's rarely turning anyone away. Let's just say that Minister Pang was pleased by my generous offering. Not only did he pardon my offense, he also handed me a lucrative assignment."

"What assignment?"

A small, enigmatic smile crossed the man's face as he pointed southwest.

"In three years' time, I'll be able to earn double the silver I handed over today," he said.

"But isn't that the territory of General Lou Yue?" asked his companion. "It won't be easy to get things done there."

"Minister Pang said that Lou Yue won't be heading back there for at least a year and a half," the man replied. "Minister Pang also said it was hard to say for sure if he'll even have the fortune to stay in the capital for a few more years."

"So Minister Pang actually intends to…"

“The minister naturally has his own plans,” the man said. “It’s none of our business, anyhow. But just in case, once I assume my post, I’ll siphon all the money I can. Based on the current state of this imperial court, who knows what the future holds, right? Besides, if I want to keep a firm grip on this position, I have to offer Minister Pang tribute every year. In short, that place is ripe for the picking, so we should really put in a bit more effort.”

They exchanged knowing smiles.

The carriage set off, the wheels grinding against the ground as it gradually disappeared into the night.

No one could have guessed that inside that old, shabby carriage sat the prefect of Suzhou, who had embezzled two hundred thousand taels of snowflake silver[5] during his three years holding the post. The Ministry of Revenue had long since noticed this staggering sum, and a report had already been filed; his arrest was just a matter of time.

Upon hearing the rumors, the prefect rushed to Lin’an that very night, silver in hand, to knock on Pang Shao’s door.

Normally, Pang Shao wouldn’t have protected him, especially over such a huge sum. To Pang Shao, it would’ve been better to kill this person, rather than take his silver and invite unnecessary trouble. Then he could replace him with someone more dependable from his own faction and enjoy a steady flow of tribute every year, without any real loss.

The prefect knew, in his desperation, that he was trying to find a cure for a dead horse—but lo and behold, the horse was somehow resurrected.

A few days later, the imperial court issued a transfer order for the prefect of Suzhou.

The vast amount of money he had embezzled was completely written off. On the surface, he was demoted, but in reality, the transfer was to his advantage. He’d been sent to Lingnan to serve as its governor-general.

No one knew that on the day the newly appointed governor-general of Lingnan headed south, he received silver from Pang Shao as he passed by Lin’an.

It was several times the amount he had sent to the Pang residence the other night.

However, Minister Pang wasn't simply giving him the silver for free. Rather, it was so he could carry out a singularly important task on Minister Pang's behalf.

***

While Lou Yue wasn't the type of person who looked down upon scholar-officials in general, he never once gave manipulative ones like Pang Shao any room to save face.

Out on the battlefield with soldiers at his command, Lou Yue was bold and unyielding. He naturally possessed an unabashedly fearless energy. As a result, his mere presence threw the imperial court into unprecedented turmoil.

Pang Shao bore the brunt of his temper time and time again. With Ji Hongcheng fanning the flames on the sidelines, every Grand Assembly inevitably devolved into dissension.

Pang Shao's voice wasn't as loud as Lou Yue's, nor was he as blunt. He was almost always at a disadvantage in the argument.

Moreover, there were times Qi Min couldn't put up with it any longer and would speak up in an attempt to mediate, only for Lou Yue to also fire back at him just as aggressively. After several days of this, the Pang faction and the civil officials from more humble backgrounds, led by Qi Min—once completely at odds with each other—actually began to get along. When they crossed paths, they would even exchange reluctant greetings.

Sure enough, the conflicts between military and civil officials ran deeper than the internal conflicts between the civil officials themselves.

But Lou Yue paid them no mind.

Every time he left the Grand Assembly, he emerged with a sense of relief and vindication, as if the pent-up resentment and frustration in his heart had dissipated somewhat.

He felt so much lighter, in fact, that he was compelled to find some decent liquor to liven things up. He even got out of the carriage at the street corner and went to browse around the market in the city.

The delicate wine stocked in the residence wasn't to his taste; he only liked the fiery, rough-edged flavor of sorghum liquor. And while it could be found all over Jiangbei, here in Jiangnan, it was more of a niche commodity. With quite a bit of effort, Lou Yue finally found a restaurant specializing in northwestern cuisine, including a very potent sorghum liquor.

He dismissed his servants and headed straight for the restaurant.

But as soon as he walked in, before he could even seek out a table, someone bumped into his shoulder.

He glanced over to see a tall young man, strong and vigorous, with a particularly unfriendly look on his face.

"General Lou, someone upstairs would like to have a little chat," the man said in a low voice, his expression stony.

Who would be waiting for him upstairs?

He had offended more than a few people lately, and at the moment, he couldn't figure out which one had come to settle the score. But it didn't matter—whoever this person was, they definitely didn't harbor good intentions, nor did Lou Yue ever fear this type of confrontation.

Seeing the cold demeanor of the young man before him, Lou Yue set aside his desire to drink for now.

"Lead the way," he said with a little scoff.

He followed the man upstairs.

Surely it had to be one of the scheming conspirators belonging to Pang Shao's nest of vipers. Or if not, then one of those penniless scholars must've grown bold enough to take up the cudgel on Qi Min's behalf.

Lou Yue held himself perfectly upright as he allowed the man to lead him to the entrance of the simple private room. He wasn't the slightest bit afraid of whoever might be in there, as demonstrated by the way he chose to open the door with an aggressive kick.

The door swung open, and he froze in shock.

There was a large, round table laden with all sorts of nostalgic northwestern dishes, along with two hefty jars of sorghum liquor. A man sat on the other side of the table with a perfect, proud posture and eyes as sharp as a sword. His silhouette overlapped perfectly with Lou Yue’s memory of his old friend.

The most glaring difference was that this man was younger and more handsome, with more delicate features that were most likely inherited from his mother.

Lou Yue’s eyes grew hot.

“Wujiu, is that you?”

Chapter 80

HUO WUJIU STOOD UP and made a sweeping gesture from Lou Yue to the seat at the head of the table.

“Yes, it’s me,” he said. “It’s been so many years since we last met, yet General Lou still remembers me. I’m glad.”

For a moment, Lou Yue didn’t know what kind of expression to wear.

He stood in the doorway, unable to take a single step, eyes trained on Huo Wujiu’s face. A few seconds later, his gaze shifted downward in disbelief to Huo Wujiu’s legs.

Those legs supported Huo Wujiu perfectly well. He stood there, tall and straight, like a tree braced against the wind.

Naturally, Huo Wujiu knew why he was so astonished.

But he remained standing there, silent and composed, waiting patiently for Lou Yue to speak first.

Another moment passed before Lou Yue finally found his voice again.

“Your legs… Weren’t your legs already…?” He trailed off, his voice trembling faintly. Gone was the unshakable confidence and overbearing aggression he had displayed while confronting Pang Shao earlier.

Huo Wujiu smiled lightly. “As you can see, they’re fine.”

Without making any attempt to hide his newly healed legs, he walked steadily over to Lou Yue and invited him to take the seat of honor, then sat down across from him.

Only then did Lou Yue manage to tear his eyes away so he could survey the private room they were in.

The room wasn’t very large. Several tall, well-built young men stood around nearby. He didn’t recognize any of them except for the person standing behind Huo Wujiu.

That man was Wei Kai, the child that his old friend had taken in many years ago. He was someone who always made sure to repay the kindness he was given.

Now, Lou Yue could vaguely guess what had happened.

Tears brimmed in his eyes, and he hastily wiped them away.

“I was worried at first,” he admitted. “I didn’t expect you to be this capable. To think you somehow managed to evade Pang Shao’s watchful gaze…”

Huo Wujiu chuckled and gestured for Wei Kai to fill Lou Yue’s cup with liquor.

Throwing back his head, Lou Yue drained the liquid in the cup.

With some alcohol in his system, his shock started to subside at last, and his tongue loosened.

“But…how?” he couldn’t help asking. “You’re stuck in the Prince of Jing’s residence right now, after all, and Pang Shao has many eyes on that place.”

Hit by a strange revelation, he paused and looked at Huo Wujiu in shock.

“Don’t tell me…”

Lou Yue struggled to finish his thought, but Huo Wujiu knew what he was getting at.

He nodded. “It was the Prince of Jing.”

“As you know, the Prince of Jing has been at odds with the emperor for a long time now,” Wei Kai explained from the sidelines. “This attempt to humiliate General Huo also brought disgrace upon the Prince of Jing. If it weren’t for the prince’s willingness to collude, I wouldn’t have been able to infiltrate his residence or find someone who could heal General Huo’s legs.”

Lou Yue nodded in response and murmured softly to himself, “I knew I didn’t misjudge him…” Then he suddenly frowned, puzzled. “But isn’t the Prince of Jing a cut-sleeve?”

“Just a pretense, of course!” Wei Kai clarified quickly before Huo Wujiu could get a word in edgewise. “A clever ruse, indeed.”

Lou Yue exhaled deeply and picked up his cup again, knocking it back.

“The heavens see all,” he sighed.

Ducking his head, Huo Wujiu let out a low, muffled laugh.

“You can be at ease now, General Lou,” he said.

Lou Yue nodded repeatedly.

“However…” Huo Wujiu added abruptly. He fixed Lou Yue with an intense gaze. “The heavens may see all, but you should know as well as anyone that in times like these, a watchful eye is all they’ll offer. It’s not up to gods or fate. The outcome is decided by human effort.”

He pressed one hand against the table as he leaned forward slightly, watching Lou Yue.

Though Lou Yue met his eyes, he seemed to find himself momentarily at a loss for words.

He understood what Huo Wujiu was trying to say.

A beat later, he lowered his eyes and heaved another deep sigh.

“I knew you didn’t come here today just to let me know that you were safe and sound,” he said. “Go on; just say it.”

“Though I’ve already regained the ability to walk, and escaping back to Yecheng would not be difficult, certain concerns continue to weigh on me. They keep me here and hold me back from leaving,” Huo Wujiu said steadily. “But I’m not staying here just to sit around and await death.”

As he poured more liquor for Lou Yue, he continued his explanation.

“By now, you must’ve noticed the current state of Southern Jing. In fact, you understand it even better than I do, no doubt. As far as I’m concerned, the only difference is whether I rally the troops in Yecheng or right here within Southern Jing. General Lou, it’s time to consider your own future as well.”

He paused, then glanced over at Lou Yue. “I’ll be blunt. Everything is already in place on my side. I simply wish to borrow the fifty thousand

soldiers under your command.”

With that, Huo Wujiu leaned his arm casually on the table and just watched. Lou Yue didn’t respond immediately, and a silence settled over the room.

After a brief pause, Lou Yue spoke in a low voice. “Wujiu, I haven’t forgotten what you did for me back then,” he said. “I remember. I still owe you my life.”

Several years ago, in Yangguan, when a heavy snowstorm blocked the mountain path, he and his soldiers had been left stranded, their supplies nearly exhausted. The situation quickly became so dire that they were on the verge of killing their warhorses for food just to survive. And then Huo Wujiu—still merely a growing teenage boy—arrived in the nick of time. Leading a light cavalry, he entered the mountains to rescue Lou Yue and his men.

This was a debt of gratitude that he owed Huo Wujiu. He knew this, without a doubt.

Except Huo Wujiu shook his head.

“I don’t intend to exploit that. I’m not trying to strong-arm you into anything,” he said mildly. “My only question to you is this: If Southern Jing falls, what do you plan to do?”

Lou Yue went silent.

“As Southern Jing stands today, it doesn’t seem all that worth dying for,” Huo Wujiu continued. “Besides, your daughter isn’t even twenty yet, is she? Where do you expect her to go?”

Lou Yue’s eyes began to glisten slightly.

Everything Huo Wujiu said made perfect sense. Lou Yue was well aware of these issues. In fact, he’d felt a constant sense of looming, uneasy dread ever since his return.

But…wasn’t he suggesting…?

When Lou Yue finally spoke, his voice was hoarse and choked. “I can’t betray my country, Wujiu. You should know this.”

Huo Wujiu nodded.

“I do,” he said. “But what if your own countrymen fail you? What if they mean to drive you to your death?”

Lou Yue couldn’t respond to that.

This thought had first crossed his mind many years ago, when the former Marquis of Dingbei first rebelled. Undoubtedly, what the previous emperor did to the marquis was both terrible and disheartening. But ultimately, Lou Yue felt he was an outsider to this conflict. He couldn’t bring himself to betray the soldiers under his command by inciting them to treason, just to honor a personal brotherly bond.

He tried to convince himself that this was merely a score to be settled between the Marquis of Dingbei and Emperor Ling of Jing, nothing more. He endured, standing on the sidelines—the greatest compromise he could make.

Although Lou Yue swore to stay off that battlefield, wars broke out across the land year after year. Southern Jing’s imperial court grew increasingly corrupt at its core, and its people’s living conditions steadily deteriorated. When Pang Shao came to power, things only got worse.

As a general, Lou Yue was honor bound to remain loyal to the emperor and serve his country. But this emperor had caused great misery and suffering, and the country itself had already begun to crumble, leaving the people displaced and astray. As a result, Lou Yue’s dedication had already wavered numerous times.

Even so, it was his lifelong duty to defend the peace of Great Jing.

After a pause, he said slowly, “But my countrymen haven’t failed me yet.”

Even as Lou Yue spoke those words, he could hear the hesitance in his own voice.

When he looked at Huo Wujiu, a hint of uncertainty surfaced in his eyes.

Huo Wujiu watched him silently for a moment, then smirked and let out a carefree laugh.

“Well, that’s true,” he said. “In that case, there’s no reason for me to continue pressuring you.”

Lou Yue hadn’t expected Huo Wujiu to be so cooperative or to let him off the hook so easily.

“But you…” he protested lightly.

“There will always be other ways,” Huo Wujiu said. “General, today you should eat and drink to your heart’s content. I’ll keep you company until we’re both thoroughly drunk. How about it?”

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When Lou Yue returned to his residence, he was indeed quite intoxicated.

Huo Wujiu’s men were efficient, and they’d scoped out and taken care of the security at the restaurant. It also helped that Lou Yue’s original intention was genuinely to search for somewhere to drink. Consequently, their meeting was kept a secret, and no word of it got out.

Upon returning to his residence, Lou Yue felt quite despondent.

“What a good boy… Tingzhang raised such a good boy!” he wailed over and over, choked with emotion. “But I’ve let him down. Not only Tingzhang, I’ve let down his son as well!”

This Tingzhang he was drunkenly sputtering about was Huo Wujiu’s father.

Lou Wanjun stood to the side, directing the maids to attend to him. She knew her father didn’t have a very high alcohol tolerance, to say the least—even she could drink more than him. Tonight, the smell of liquor on him was especially overpowering, and he’d drunk so much that he couldn’t seem to walk in a straight line.

As she listened to her father ramble on, she couldn’t help but feel a bit amused.

“Who did you let down?” she asked.

Lou Yue shook his head and didn’t respond for a good while.

Laughing to herself, Lou Wanjun wrung out a handkerchief and wiped his face clean for him.

Then Lou Yue suddenly spoke again.

“But he truly is a good boy.” He gazed at Lou Wanjun. “Really, a fine young man. As your dad, it would put my worries to rest if I could entrust you to him.”

Lou Wanjun was at a loss for words.

However, she didn’t take her father too seriously. Ever since she’d reached a marriageable age, he’d insisted on aggressively playing matchmaker for her. Every time he saw a decent-looking man who was at least somewhat literate and wasn’t missing any limbs, he would evaluate them according to his standards for a potential son-in-law. Alas, when it came to his standards, the bar was more or less on the floor, so practically every man managed to look halfway acceptable.

After several years of this, he’d found enough potential suitors to put together an advance guard.

Lou Wanjun smiled and set the handkerchief down in the basin.

“You really are drunk this time. Here you go again, finding new sons-in-law all over the place.” She turned around and arched one elegant eyebrow, glancing at the soldier who usually stayed at Lou Yue’s side, serving him.

“Let the general drink too much again, did you? Looks like it’s time for some retraining.”

The soldier shrank back in long-suffering silence, hunching his shoulders and offering her a sheepish smile.

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Huo Wujiu, on the other hand, wasn’t drunk at all.

However, he could smell the alcohol on himself, and he knew he couldn’t leave his room like this. After he got back, he sent Wei Kai to the main hall to see if Jiang Suizhou had time to come over briefly.

Night had already fallen by this point. Not long after, Jiang Suizhou followed Wei Kai over.

When he entered, Huo Wujiu was sitting at the table, leafing listlessly through a book.

Since he'd been drinking, his expression was less guarded than usual, and his impatience with the book was displayed more vividly.

He slowly rocked back and forth on the wheelchair, flipping loudly through the pages. At the sound of the door opening, he pushed the book forward on the table and lifted his head.

"You're here!"

Jiang Suizhou caught a whiff of alcohol from him.

"You went to see Lou Yue today and drank with him?" he asked, sitting down on the nearby couch.

Huo Wujiu nodded and wheeled himself toward Jiang Suizhou with one hand. Then, feeling that the wheelchair was a bit cumbersome, he braced his foot against the floor and brought it to a halt before standing and walking over to Jiang Suizhou. He very naturally took a seat next to him.

"I didn't drink that much," he said. "But that poor guy's getting up there in years and can't hold his drink anymore. Just a tiny bit of alcohol and they practically had to carry him home."

Though he rarely showed much emotion on his face, he was unusually animated this evening. Something about his current expression made it seem as though he were glowing with delight. It was a far cry from the inscrutable, solemn demeanor he'd had when he met with Lou Yue earlier in the day.

"So you were successful?" Jiang Suizhou quickly asked.

Huo Wujiu shook his head.

"He's being quite stubborn," he said seriously. "No matter what I said to convince him, he kept refusing."

Immediately, a slight gnawing of panic formed inside Jiang Suizhou.

Personal feelings aside, he understood just how essential Lou Yue was to Huo Wujiu's plan. Lou Yue's soldiers in particular were an especially important component. In fact, without Lou Yue's men, Huo Wujiu's plan was fundamentally unfeasible.

“What now?” Jiang Suizhou asked. Seeing Huo Wujiu’s eyebrows knit together, he grew even more worried.

Huo Wujiu looked at him for a moment, then laughed.

Unmistakable joy spread across his face, dissolving any remaining tension there. He rested his hand on Jiang Suizhou’s back and petted him, almost as if he were a cat.

“Hey, don’t fret. We still have you. He might be holding out for now, but that’s just because Pang Shao hasn’t backed him into a corner yet.” Huo Wujiu paused, then added, “But as you know, the signs are already there… It’s just a matter of time.”

His abrupt change in expression instantly led Jiang Suizhou to realize that Huo Wujiu was merely teasing him.

…How wicked.

Jiang Suizhou gave him a disapproving look, irritated at being made to worry for nothing.

“Are you trying to scare me?” he said reproachfully.

His voice was soft. Even paired with a little frown, it didn’t make him come across as particularly threatening. In fact, it only betrayed the sweetness hidden beneath and filled Huo Wujiu with sudden, overwhelming fondness. In his eyes, Jiang Suizhou was the most adorable person in the world, even while frowning at him.

Crossing his arms, Huo Wujiu leaned back against the soft pillow behind him. It was the bold, swaggering pose of a bandit chief, yet he acted like he was deliberately playing dumb without a shred of shame.

“Of course not,” he said.

His enunciation was clear, his eyes bright and calm as he looked at Jiang Suizhou with a small, languid smile.

“I just had a bit too much to drink, that’s all.”

Chapter 81

HUO WUJIU HARDLY LOOKED like someone who had drunk too much.

As Jiang Suizhou met that pair of smugly amused eyes, he couldn't help but laugh.

"In that case, you should get some rest," he said, starting to stand.

Much to his surprise, he felt a sudden tug on his arm.

Even though Huo Wujiu was perfectly capable of sitting up on his own, for some reason he insisted on grasping Jiang Suizhou's arm to use as leverage to pull himself upright.

He nearly sent Jiang Suizhou stumbling back onto the couch in the process.

"Hey…!"

Jiang Suizhou only managed to steady himself by quickly bracing his hand against the small table nearby, releasing an indignant yelp.

"Anyway, in conclusion, you don't need to worry," Huo Wujiu said firmly before Jiang Suizhou could say anything.

He turned to look at Huo Wujiu, who then amended his statement.

"There's a limit to what I can do when it comes to court affairs, though," he said. "If Pang Shao intends to do something to Lou Yue, it'll likely be a while before word of it reaches me."

"Now that's something *you* don't need to worry about," Jiang Suizhou said. "I've had people keeping an extra close eye on him ever since the banquet. The moment he makes the slightest move, I'll notify you immediately."

"With you here, I'm not worried at all," Huo Wujiu replied.

Even though a faint smile still lingered on his face and his tone remained light, Jiang Suizhou somehow sensed a quiet sincerity and trust in his voice.

Jiang Suizhou nodded firmly in response.

“Y’know, there’s something I haven’t been able to figure out,” Huo Wujiu said, slumping back against the pillow.

“Oh? What’s that?”

Huo Wujiu flipped idly through a nearby book with one hand, but his eyes never left Jiang Suizhou.

“I heard that your father doted on you quite a bit,” he said. “So why did Jiang Shunheng become emperor instead of you?”

A surprisingly salient question, actually. Luckily, Jiang Suizhou was uniquely well equipped to answer it. This used to be his exact field of study as a history professor, after all. There were likely some things he understood even better than the original Prince of Jing himself.

“My father passed unexpectedly and didn’t leave behind a posthumous edict,” he said. “Regardless of anything else, my brother was still the eldest son of the empress consort. Then after my father died, my mother was quietly killed as well. With no one to turn to or rely on, of course I couldn’t compete with him, especially since he had Pang Shao’s support.”

Huo Wujiu clicked his tongue.

“It’s a pity I met you so late,” he said.

Jiang Suizhou had to laugh at that.

“What? So if you’d met me earlier, would you have rallied your troops and made me emperor?” he asked.

Huo Wujiu lowered his eyes, as if deep in thought. A moment later, he looked up again and leaned toward Jiang Suizhou, hand braced against the pillow.

“Now that I think about it, it’s not too late for that,” he said.

“…Huh?” Jiang Suizhou was confused.

Huo Wujiu gazed at him, his dark eyes suddenly ablaze.

“If that day ever comes, would you want to be emperor?”

Naturally, Jiang Suizhou didn’t dare to take Huo Wujiu’s words seriously.

According to his knowledge of history, Southern Jing was destined to fall. Over the next few centuries, those in power would all bear the surname Huo. This was the inevitable, natural cycle of dynastic change during feudal times, as well as the trajectory of history for the world itself.

If Huo Wujiu actually did as he said…

As a transmigrator, Jiang Suizhou was an interloper. If he took the throne for himself and pulled Jing back from the brink of destruction at the hands of Northern Liang, he’d be transforming himself from a mere keeper of history to an active participant in it…

What was he thinking?! He was a humble professor, not a ruler. He hardly had the courage for that. This line of thinking didn’t warrant any further consideration.

“No,” Jiang Suizhou said curtly, shaking his head for emphasis.

Huo Wujiu didn’t believe him.

“Really, now?”

He’d gotten quite close to Jiang Suizhou—a bit too close for comfort. Jiang Suizhou inched away slightly as he gave another resolute shake of his head.

“I’ve never thought about it before.”

Huo Wujiu watched him for another moment, then laughed softly.

“You sure are something,” he sighed.

He could tell from Jiang Suizhou’s expression that he wasn’t lying. He struggled to wrap his head around it all. How had the Prince of Jing’s absurdly rich and powerful father managed to spoil him with so much for so long, only to produce nothing more than a timid, rule-abiding little white rabbit?

“Is that really so strange?” Jiang Suizhou asked, confused, seeing the look on his face. “What about you, then? Have you wanted to be emperor before?”

“Of course,” Huo Wujiu immediately replied.

Jiang Suizhou didn’t expect such a swift, candid reply. More than that, though, it seemed completely at odds with recorded history. His current demeanor didn’t align at all with the choices he made in the timeline Jiang Suizhou knew.

“Then why did you…” he began.

He didn’t finish his question, but Huo Wujiu knew more or less what he wanted to ask.

“You know about the Battle of Xunyang, right?” he said.

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

“My father died, and my cousin and uncle were separated on the battlefield,” he said with a placid expression, as though recounting the events of someone else’s life entirely. “Even if I had managed to break through the siege with the few men I had left, it would be difficult to ensure our survival. So first, I found my uncle and joined forces with him.”

Jiang Suizhou made a noise of acknowledgment.

After a pause, Huo Wujiu continued, “Both of them sustained serious injuries during that battle, resulting in chronic health problems. For my uncle, it was because he insisted on doubling back to search for my father, while my cousin’s injuries were because I’d found him too late. His troops were almost entirely wiped out. I had to dig him out of a pile of bodies.”

Hidden beneath the calm in his voice, Jiang Suizhou could hear a faint quaver, an almost imperceptible heaviness.

At a loss for words, he could only gaze quietly at Huo Wujiu.

“My father was the one who first rebelled,” Huo Wujiu said. “According to that logic, I should be the one on the throne. But my uncle’s family swiftly rebelled alongside him, and the tragedy that befell them was undeniably linked to my father as well…”

At this point, he smiled and adopted a deliberately light tone.

“On second thought, I guess I don’t want to sit on the throne that badly. My father only revolted to protect our family, and now that goal has been achieved. Let them have the throne. I’ll consider it fair compensation for everything else.”

Jiang Suizhou knew that the Battle of Xunyang had been particularly terrible, but he had never come across any of these details in the historical records.

To historians of the future, it was just another vivid, dramatic stroke on the broad canvas of history. Modern scholars discussed Huo Wujiu's daring tactics and praised him for his godlike command of the battlefield. It was a rare example of a brilliantly successful counterattack launched from the brink of despair, and it cemented Huo Wujiu's place in the history books. No one knew that the very battle that immortalized him as a hero had also dealt a devastating blow to his entire family.

In the end, all his family had wanted was to survive and keep each other safe.

Huo Wujiu glanced over at Jiang Suizhou to find him silent and lost in thought, looking pensive almost to the point of despondence.

Jiang Suizhou gazed back at him with undisguised tenderness, as if he felt such overwhelming empathy that it might spill over at any moment.

This sort of softhearted person was exactly the type that a tough guy like him was most drawn to.

Huo Wujiu moved even closer to him, a smile playing on his lips.

"What are you so upset about? It's all in the past now," he said.

"So," Jiang Suizhou said quietly, "do you plan to go back one day and continue defending Yangguan?"

Huo Wujiu lifted an eyebrow.

"Why would I do that?" he remarked. "It's so desolate and remote that not even the Tatars want a piece of it. You're stuck guarding it day after day, and there aren't even any wars to fight. What's the point?"

Jiang Suizhou was puzzled. "Is that so?"

He looked at Huo Wujiu, who returned his gaze, just as puzzled.

"Yeah," he said. "What's on your mind?"

Jiang Suizhou fell silent as his confusion deepened.

Huo Wujiu wouldn't lie to him, but… Why, then, according to the official historical records, did he choose to return to Yangguan and spend

the rest of his life guarding it?

No one but Jiang Suizhou was privy to that glimpse of the future. He tucked his question away in the back of his mind and resigned himself to wait for the right moment when he could receive the answer from Huo Wujiu.

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After that day, he went about work as usual at the Ministry of Rites.

Normally, this administerial department didn't have many tasks to handle. Unless there was a major festival or ceremony, their daily workload was fairly light. On this particular day, Jiang Suizhou made his usual rounds through the office to see if there was anything he could do, only to come up empty-handed. Being a certified slacker, he informed his new supervisor that he was heading back to his residence and promptly left.

When he arrived back home, he was startled to find a very unexpected visitor standing at the front gates.

That person was a young woman, clad in formfitting robes that had tapered sleeves—giving her a bold, carefree air. A servant carrying an armful of gifts waited awkwardly behind her while she stood at the gate, seemingly caught in an argument with the gatekeeper.

…Lou Wanjun?

What was she doing here? Jiang Suizhou felt both a little confused and oddly nervous at the sight of her. After the carriage came to a stop in front of the gate, he stepped down just in time to hear Lou Wanjun make her final remark.

"Oh, so you're not letting me enter? Fine, I'm leaving, then."

"Hang on, Miss!" the gatekeeper hastily said. "It's just that our residence has a rule—I need to report all visitors first. Please just wait a moment…"

He had probably realized that she was someone important and didn't dare offend her. However, Lou Wanjun didn't seem to care in the slightest.

“I’m not here for anything important, anyway. Forget it, if it’s going to be such a hassle. I’ve shown my sincerity, okay? You’re the ones who wouldn’t let me in.”

She immediately turned to leave. Out of ideas, the gatekeeper rushed forward to stop her.

“Miss! That’s not it…”

He’d never encountered someone like her before! She was clearly here to deliver gifts to the Prince of Jing’s residence, yet she stubbornly refused to go in, as if someone had forced her to come here. And it wasn’t like he’d even made things difficult for her.

At that moment, Jiang Suizhou intervened.

“Miss Lou?”

Hearing His Highness’s voice, the gatekeeper sighed in relief. Faced with a predicament like this, even the fearsome Prince of Jing seemed unusually pleasant and agreeable. He bowed to Jiang Suizhou with obvious and genuine gratitude before swiftly dropping behind him like a loyal shadow.

“This young lady came to deliver presents, but she won’t go inside,” he explained.

Jiang Suizhou looked at Lou Wanjun. For some reason, her eyes seemed to light up the moment they landed on him.

“Oh, it’s you!” she exclaimed brightly. “I, Lou Wanjun, humbly greet His Highness!”

Smiling broadly, she cupped her fist in respectful greeting. Quite like a wandering martial artist.

Putting aside her relationship with Huo Wujiu, Jiang Suizhou knew this young woman was genuinely likable, with a cheerful and candid personality. That should’ve been a good thing. After all, for Huo Wujiu, it meant he wouldn’t be placing his trust in the wrong person, and for Jiang Suizhou, it meant he wouldn’t have to worry for Huo Wujiu.

He just…couldn’t bring himself to feel happy about it, that was all.

He nodded lightly. “What brings you here today, Miss Lou?”

“Oh, nothing much.” She pointed at the servant behind her, who was still carrying the gifts. “I just came to see Huo Wujiu. My father’s concerned about him.”

This was only partially true—she was well aware that her father’s “concern” was an excuse. After all, Huo Wujiu had been his drinking buddy that night when he came home stumbling drunk. If Huo Wujiu could drink her dad under the table, he most likely didn’t need his consideration.

It was just a convenient way for Lou Yue to disguise his true ulterior motive.

For this reason, Lou Wanjun had no intention of taking this visit too seriously. She was just here to go through the motions, and once she returned, she would say that she wasn’t allowed into the Prince of Jing’s residence. Her dad couldn’t exactly punish her for that.

Although…while she was here…

Her eye wandered appraisingly over the Prince of Jing, who was standing before her.

He was dressed in court attire, which meant he was returning from the office. Despite his cool, aloof demeanor, there was a subtle gentleness to him that was incredibly alluring. All in all, Lou Wanjun had never seen such a beautiful man before in her life. He was in a completely different league than the military men she served alongside.

So what if he was a cut-sleeve? There was no harm in appreciating the view.

“I see. In that case, feel free to head inside, Miss Lou,” the Prince of Jing said, smiling politely.

Lou Wanjun still didn’t actually want to go, so instead she asked another question.

“Are you sure it wouldn’t be too inconvenient? I heard from my father that you and Huo Wujiu live together…”

This question seemed to render the Prince of Jing momentarily speechless and extremely flustered.

Goodness gracious, she thought. Seeing a beauty get shy and bashful like this was unexpectedly exciting.

This beautiful cut-sleeve man was much more interesting than those burly men in the army. He was so easily embarrassed.

She stared at Jiang Suizhou with fiery eyes, which did nothing to ease his nerves.

Jiang Suizhou anxiously returned her gaze.

Lou Wanjun must have misconstrued the details of Huo Wujiu and his relationship. After all, he had the reputation of being a cut-sleeve, and Huo Wujiu was technically his concubine. It made sense that an outsider would misunderstand. However, while it didn't really matter if anyone *else* got the wrong idea, it could be disastrous for Lou Wanjun to make such assumptions.

Jiang Suizhou knew just how powerful the butterfly effect could be. Even though he had feelings for Huo Wujiu, he didn't want to let a misunderstanding disrupt Huo Wujiu and Lou Wanjun's future together, robbing him of a fated connection.

At the same time, he couldn't openly explain the truth of their situation to her, not in such a public setting.

Pausing, he suppressed his tumultuous emotions and smiled faintly. "It wouldn't be inconvenient at all. Go ahead, Miss Lou."

Lou Wanjun blinked.

Well, who could refuse a beauty's persistent invitation?

"Many thanks, Your Highness." She flashed another smile at Jiang Suizhou and gestured for him to head inside with her.

Even Jiang Suizhou had to admit that her smile was dazzling.

He offered a strained smile in return before they walked into the residence together.

However, that smile took on another meaning altogether in Lou Wanjun's eyes.

What a pretty man, she marveled. Normally, the prince's beauty could only be admired from afar. He was cold, untouchable, and distant…until he smiled. Like flowers blooming suddenly on a snow-capped mountain, that

smile softened his sharp edges ever so slightly and made him startlingly vibrant and captivating.

Lou Wanjun shook her head, sighing internally.

Who could hold their own against that? If Huo Wujiu could spend so much time by the Prince of Jing’s side and still remain unmoved, then he had to be blind.

Chapter 82

THEY PASSED THROUGH the front gate together to find Jiang Suizhou's palanquin already waiting for him next to the path.

As Meng Qianshan approached to usher him into it, Jiang Suizhou contemplated briefly and then he shook his head.

"It's fine. I'll walk with Miss Lou."

His health was often poor and his residence large, so he usually traveled by palanquin. But there was only one available at the moment, and it didn't feel right to sit in it while making his guest walk alongside him.

Meng Qianshan quickly nodded and signaled for the porters to take the palanquin away.

Though this was a common occurrence in the residence, Lou Wanjun was quite intrigued by the showy display and the retinue of attendants surrounding the Prince of Jing. Smiling, she quickly struck up a conversation with him.

Eventually Jiang Suizhou found himself letting his guard down a little. He was unable to sustain his aloof and haughty front when faced with her personality, and it wasn't long before he was deep in conversation with her.

He had to admit, there was an exceptionally vivid, magnetic energy about Lou Wanjun, shaped by years on the battlefield and life in the military camps.

They kept chatting as they gradually made their way to Anyin Hall's courtyard. The prince's residence was vast, and it had been a long time since Jiang Suizhou had walked this far. By the time they reached the courtyard gate, his legs were already starting to feel a little unsteady.

Lou Wanjun was quick to notice.

"Your Highness really is quite frail," she said.

Jiang Suizhou dipped his head. “Apologies for the inconvenience, Miss Lou. I was born sickly, and even after all these years, little has changed.”

Lou Wanjun shook her head.

Sure enough, if someone were truly perfect in every way, even the heavens would envy him.

They resumed conversing as they continued through the courtyard. Soon, they slowed to a halt, and Jiang Suizhou motioned in the direction of Huo Wujiu’s living quarters.

“His room is over there. Please go ahead. I’m going to rest in my room for a while.”

They likely had matters they needed to discuss in private, so he had to show some tact.

“You two don’t live together?” Lou Wanjun asked in surprise.

Jiang Suizhou shook his head.

“All right, then,” she said, heaving a small sigh for some reason. “Thank you for showing me the way, Your Highness. I don’t have much to say to him, so I’ll be quick with it. No need to worry!”

Jiang Suizhou nodded. Out of courtesy, and because he was now back in his own courtyard where appearances mattered less, he also gave her a gentle smile.

Lou Wanjun cupped her hands at him, satisfied, before heading toward Huo Wujiu’s room with her servant following close behind.

Jiang Suizhou silently watched her retreating figure for a moment. Then, dodging the issue as always, he turned and walked into the main hall without a word.

The door closed quietly behind him.

***

Ever since she was a kid, Lou Wanjun had never really liked Huo Wujiu.

Lou Wanjun's childhood was a bit tumultuous. Because her mother died delivering her, she'd grown up following her father wherever he was assigned. Just as she reached the age where she was beginning to form lasting memories, her father brought her to Yangguan.

Partly due to the loss of her mother, her father and other elders treated her with exceptional tenderness, sometimes to the point of coddling her. The other kids who grew up on the frontier were mostly rambunctious boys who'd rarely so much as seen a girl. Because of this, they always yielded to her whenever they played together.

Huo Wujiu was the only exception.

Out of all those brats, he had the worst personality and was by far the most difficult to discipline. Even someone as strong and healthy as Uncle Huo would sometimes clutch at his heart because of Huo Wujiu's infuriating antics.

Despite his utterly insufferable personality and behavior, Huo Wujiu was also unfortunately tall, handsome, and skilled in fighting and horse riding. Even though he either looked down on or completely ignored every single one of them, the other kids willingly put up with him. In fact, they followed him like he was their own little king, the self-appointed ruler of their mountain kingdom.

And naturally, the king of the mountain pass had little interest in playing with girls.

It was during that time that Lou Wanjun experienced a kind of exclusion that she'd never faced before. Worse still, it came in the form of silent indifference that she had no choice but to endure without complaint. Although Huo Wujiu never mocked her verbally, his complete lack of acknowledgment hurt just as much, if not more. With a casual wave of his hand, he would lead that group of unruly boys off into the wilderness to climb trees, ride horses, or hunt. Not a single one of those activities was something Lou Wanjun could participate in.

She was young at the time and so furious that she always burst into tears in response. Fortunately, Huo Wujiu had an older cousin named Huo

Yuyan, who had a calm temperament and was willing to stay behind and play with her.

"Wujiu is just a bit proud, that's all. He means no harm," Huo Yuyan would console her, his voice slow and unhurried. "Don't hold it against him."

But Lou Wanjun didn't take his words to heart. Once she grew a bit older and learned some martial arts, she devised her own plans to deal with Huo Wujiu.

For years, she repeatedly sought him out for showdowns to prove her superiority. Her goal was to one day pummel him into submission, claim the top spot in the hierarchy, and ultimately turn the tables to isolate *him* from his peers instead.

However, Huo Wujiu never showed any interest in fighting her. He continued to look down on her simply because she was a girl. Even after she took down every single one of his little underlings one by one, he still refused to engage.

That was their dynamic in a nutshell: a one-sided rivalry from Lou Wanjun that had lasted for over a decade and continued to this day. Whenever she thought about it, she found herself so full of fury it made her teeth ache.

And to think her father wanted her to marry Huo Wujiu?

He might as well just kill her and put her out of her misery now.

Lou Wanjun strode up to Huo Wujiu's door. Without bothering to knock, she slammed it open with a strong, well-placed kick.

"Wait outside," she told the servant as she took the gifts from him.

Then she walked into the room and kicked the door shut behind her.

Huo Wujiu's living quarters consisted of five spacious rooms that were richly furnished and opulently decorated. The high-quality furniture and decor made it clear at a glance that he was living comfortably and that there was certainly no reason for anyone to worry about him.

As she surveyed her surroundings, carrying the gifts in her arms, she heard the sound of wooden wheels rolling against the floor.

She looked in the direction of the sound to see a broad-shouldered young man seated in a wheelchair. His legs were especially long, and the way they were squeezed to fit on the chair gave him a faint air of indignity, as if he'd been made to stoop beneath his station.

His facial features were sharp and striking. A scar cut through the arch of one brow, and his eyes were as fierce as a falcon's. This was none other than Huo Wujiu.

Lou Wanjun burst out laughing.

"Oh hey, if it isn't the defeated man himself!"

Grinning, she set the gifts down on a nearby table and walked over to him. Then she gave Huo Wujiu's wheelchair a sharp kick.

Instantly, the supposedly disabled Huo Wujiu shot up from the chair to loom over her like a mountain.

He was exceptionally tall and currently exuding an overwhelmingly oppressive presence that made Lou Wanjun involuntarily take a small step back.

"You…" Even as she stumbled over her words, her eyes stayed locked on Huo Wujiu. It took her a few seconds to find her voice again. "You were faking it?"

Huo Wujiu gave her an ambiguous glance, then walked over and sat down in a chair.

"Need something?"

He displayed none of the warmth one might expect to see during a long-awaited reunion. On the contrary, he still had that same dismissive, arrogant attitude, as if everyone else was beneath him. It was just as maddening as it had been seven or eight years ago, and it made her fists itch to beat him up.

Lou Wanjun glowered as she sat down across from him.

"I just dropped by to see if you were still alive," she snapped. Then, shooting Wei Kai a derisive look, she added, "Why are you just standing there instead of pouring some tea?"

Standing to the side, Wei Kai couldn’t help but quiver. He hastily stepped forward to oblige their esteemed visitor’s request.

But this guest was no stranger to Wei Kai. In fact, the fear he felt toward her was deep-seated, already carved into his very bones. He didn’t dare provoke her.

This young woman had been at odds with his general since they were all children, but since she couldn’t convince him to fight her directly, she instead turned her attention to his followers. Although Wei Kai and the others weren’t exactly weak small fry themselves, she was truly formidable. No matter how hard they tried, they could never beat her. They ended up bruised and battered every single time.

Even the memory of it sent a chill down his spine.

Lou Wanjun took a sip of tea, thinking that she would only stay for a bit longer and then leave. At that moment, however, Huo Wujiu spoke.

“What were you doing walking with the Prince of Jing just now?”

There was an unexpectedly accusatory note in his voice.

Lou Wanjun looked up. Only now did she notice that something was slightly off about Huo Wujiu.

This man treated most other people with little regard, as if he were above them all. It was hard to draw a smile from him, but it was even harder to make him scowl. Yet, starting from the moment she stepped into his room today, Huo Wujiu’s brow had remained tightly furrowed, his gaze decidedly unfriendly.

She belatedly realized that she must have offended him, but…how? Well, whatever it was, there was something unusual going on here.

“Am I not allowed to walk with him?” Lou Wanjun said blithely. “We ran into each other at the front gate, so we chatted and walked over here together. You got a problem with that?”

Huo Wujiu’s frown deepened.

“He didn’t take the palanquin?” he asked.

“Nope. Oh, there was one waiting inside the gate, but he didn’t get in. He walked here with me.”

As soon as she said that, Huo Wujiu’s eyes abruptly grew even colder.

This piqued Lou Wanjun’s interest.

How curious. Why would a guy who never seemed to care about anything at all suddenly care *so* much about such trivialities?

Lou Wanjun continued talking, every word honest and heartfelt.

“You know, I don’t know how the Prince of Jing ended up with such a terrible reputation. Clearly, the civil court officials are the bad apples here for spreading such blatant lies,” she said. “I mean, I’ve never seen such a beautiful man in my life! And with such a gentle, pleasant temperament too. I’d say he’s something of a rare treasure, wouldn’t you agree?”

She watched with subdued glee as Huo Wujiu's face visibly darkened.

He didn't respond right away. Wei Kai also stayed fearfully silent.

A long moment later, Huo Wujiu's reply came through gritted teeth.

"In the future, don't come to the Prince of Jing's residence unless you have urgent business. In fact, even if you do have business here, don't come. Stay away from him."

***

Lou Wanjun was enlightened.

People often said that some things couldn't be forced, that it was best to let them take their course. In time, they would come on their own, like a pleasant surprise falling from the sky.

For instance, she'd been itching to take Huo Wujiu down a peg or two for years, but the opportunity had never presented itself…until today. She'd finally managed to infuriate him, and best of all, it was in a way that he had no choice but to silently endure.

She took a moment to savor the sight of Huo Wujiu holding back his anger, then dusted off her robes and strode out of the room feeling invigorated.

After she left, Huo Wujiu remained seated for a while, his expression cold and grim.

This…was a classic military pitfall. As a general, he should've known better than to underestimate the enemy.

When Jiang Suizhou revealed that he wasn't actually a cut-sleeve, Huo Wujiu grew complacent. He was so busy celebrating the fact that those two flamboyant men in the rear courtyard posed no threat that he completely neglected to consider the possibility of another rival appearing out of the blue.

He had seen the way Jiang Suizhou smiled at Lou Wanjun earlier, and he had also seen the way she looked at him in turn—bright-eyed and

cunning—like a wolf about to sink its teeth into a rabbit's neck and drag it back to its den.

Huo Wujiu's jaw ached from how hard he was clenching his teeth.

And yet, he didn't dare to say anything. Jiang Suizhou wasn't much braver than one of those wild rabbits on the plains, quick to flee at the first jolt of fear. On top of that, Huo Wujiu's own feelings for him weren't exactly pure, which left him feeling a bit guilty.

Huo Wujiu paced the room like a furious caged beast, round and round, until Jiang Suizhou finally came to visit at night.

Naturally, it was because he had something to discuss with him.

Over the past few days, Pang Shao had been behaving unusually in court, and Jiang Suizhou had found a few subtle clues linked to his behavior. If they could piece those clues together, they might be able to uncover what Pang Shao was plotting.

That night, however, Jiang Suizhou was actually feeling a little guilty himself.

The information he wanted to present was largely inconsequential. He had already looked into the intel with Xu Du, and it turned out to be nothing more than routine corruption—embezzlement, bribery, and so on. It had nothing to do with Lou Yue.

But…

He'd spent the whole day in a state of restless unease, tempted again and again to find some excuse to go see Huo Wujiu and gauge how he felt about Lou Wanjun now.

And so, he showed up with all that meaningless information on hand.

He made a show of solemnly taking a seat across from Huo Wujiu before methodically laying out each piece of intel and every tip-off he'd received.

"I'm not very familiar with General Lou, so I can't say whether any of this has anything to do with him," he said in conclusion, feigning calm. "Let me know what you think."

Huo Wujiu was silent.

Jiang Suizhou looked up, puzzled, to see Huo Wujiu sitting there with a slight frown on his face.

“Huo Wujiu?” Jiang Suizhou prodded.

“You’re sure putting a lot of thought into this,” he remarked, still frowning.

“Huh?”

Huo Wujiu finally looked up at him.

“When Lou Wanjun visited today, what did you talk about with her on the way here?”

His expression was stern, as if he truly intended to make a big deal out of something so trivial.

But there was only one thing he really wanted to hear Jiang Suizhou talk about right now: the precise reason he had smiled at Lou Wanjun.

Chapter 83

JIANG SUIZHOU BLINKED, caught somewhat off guard.

What he had talked about…with Lou Wanjun? Was that really what Huo Wujiu had just asked him?

At the sight of Huo Wujiu's expression, which was a little too serious, Jiang Suizhou's heart dropped.

Did Huo Wujiu suspect that he said something he shouldn't have to Lou Wanjun? Or was he simply unhappy that he had been in close contact with her?

Well, that wasn't too surprising. Considering Huo Wujiu's relationship with her, it made complete sense for him to feel a bit possessive.

Suppressing the pang of bitterness in his heart, Jiang Suizhou forced a smile.

"Nothing much, really. Miss Lou is an excellent conversationalist, and she's quite friendly and outgoing. She tends to stick to gossip and small talk, so we didn't talk about anything important."

Huo Wujiu's eyebrows drew tight enough together to crush a fly.

Outgoing? *Friendly?*

He remembered Lou Wanjun as an unreasonable, annoyingly persistent bully. Since when was she ever outgoing? And since when did she smile so easily or look at any man near her with eyes that were practically sparkling?

Something was definitely off, yet here was Jiang Suizhou, singing her praises.

Huo Wujiu couldn't help but compare himself to Lou Wanjun.

He wasn't very talkative, and he definitely couldn't be considered outgoing. Thinking back to the way Jiang Suizhou had smiled at Lou Wanjun earlier, Huo Wujiu felt his chest grow even tighter.

This was only their second time meeting, wasn't it? How many times had he spoken to Huo Wujiu hostile and blunt, with a scowl and a glare, before he'd smiled at him?

Huo Wujiu's train of thought grew tangled and irrational, dragging his emotions along with it. His expression, in turn, became increasingly sour. A moment later, he finally spoke.

"In the future, you should keep your distance from her," he warned.

Lou Wanjun was no saint. When they were younger, she'd pester him endlessly just so she could fight him, until he was so annoyed that he wished he could flee Yangguan. Now, it looked like she was about to latch onto his pure, innocent Prince of Jing, which would lead to consequences too terrible to imagine.

For some reason, Jiang Suizhou's face seemed to fall slightly.

"…Got it," he said.

Huo Wujiu nodded firmly, then paused.

Suddenly, he found himself briefly struck by an inexplicable pang of guilt, as though he'd done something wrong just now.

What if Jiang Suizhou truly did have feelings for Lou Wanjun? Given his reaction, it certainly didn't seem impossible.

If Huo Wujiu drove a wedge between the two would-be lovebirds, would the Prince of Jing be sad?

But that rational thought only lasted for an instant before Huo Wujiu banished it from his mind.

Who cares? he thought viciously to himself.

Let him be upset. He still wasn't allowed to be with Lou Wanjun.

And who *was* the Prince of Jing allowed to be with? That was a question for later. It didn't matter at this point, but…of course, if that person ended up being Huo Wujiu himself, well, that would be best.

***

Jiang Suizhou was left with no other choice but to temporarily shift his attention and energy toward the situation unfolding in the imperial court.

Sure enough, Pang Shao made a significant move only a few days later. The target, however, was somewhat unexpected—it was Qi Min, of all people.

Lou Yue had been terrorizing the court as of late. Not only did the Pang faction suffer as a result, Qi Min's faction was also impacted by taking a constant onslaught of collateral damage.

On that particular day, Pang Shao sent a letter to one of the officials working for Qi Min.

While the letter made no mention of working together, it did outline several charges against Lou Yue for grave disrespect, intended to be submitted as memorials to the throne. Some accusations were about his loud outbursts during court assemblies, while others were about his blatant disregard for imperial edicts, as well as just generally meddling where he shouldn't have. Specifically, he stopped a carriage sent to the capital by the newly appointed prefect of Suzhou, which carried several Yangzhou Companions meant to serve as tribute for the emperor's pleasure. Lou Yue ordered his soldiers to forcibly escort those women back to Suzhou.

Qi Min knew about some of these incidents but not all. The offenses were detailed at length across several pages of the letter. Although they were mostly trivial and unlikely to result in too serious of a punishment, they were still enough to infuriate the emperor.

Pang Shao concluded the letter with a few pointed comments of his own:

As I'm sure Minister Qi and our fellow civil officials understand, if we continue to allow our military officials to wield this kind of power, the consequences will be more than any of us can bear. This man has already become so brazen, confident that his past deeds for Great Jing will shield him when he acts out of turn. Who's to say he won't commit an even graver offense, with greater disrespect, in the future? His Majesty should be made aware of these early warning signs.

This letter reached Qi Min, just as Pang Shao intended. Then, to Jiang Suizhou's surprise, Qi Min secretly had the letter passed on to him.

Qi Min also included a short note: *Pang Shao's intentions, Your Highness.*

Jiang Suizhou gazed quietly down at the letter in his hands.

There was nothing overtly wrong with it. In fact, the contents were quite standard and by the book, but given the relationship between their two factions, Pang Shao's motives for sending the letter raised plenty of questions.

His relationship with Qi Min was not a particularly friendly one, and this letter clearly wasn't meant to be a genuine, polite exchange between colleagues. On the contrary, it seemed more like Pang Shao was trying to leverage Qi Min's influence to form a temporary alliance, with the aim of bringing down Lou Yue together.

He provided Qi Min with sufficient evidence and even helped draft the specific charge against Lou Yue—an accusation of grave disrespect. He also included remarks about the need to be wary of military officials consolidating power, suggesting that Lou Yue might one day pose an even greater threat. The implication was edging dangerously close to treason or even the possibility of Lou Yue raising his own army to challenge the throne.

It seemed safe to assume that Pang Shao realized how much credibility he'd lost in the emperor's eyes, so he sought to use Qi Min to submit a memorial to the throne, charging Lou Yue for the aforementioned offenses.

What next, then?

He wouldn't have made such a bold accusation against Lou Yue without ensuring that the next step was already in place.

It was then that Jiang Suizhou received yet another confidential letter.

This one contained intel obtained by Xu Du's elite guards.

According to the letter, Pang Shao's subordinates had made numerous trips between Lin'an and various southern counties. During the trips, their only consistent activity was making repeated visits to the residences of the military commanders stationed in each county. At the same time, they also appeared to be in contact with the new governor-

general of Lingnan, Fang Zhaohe—the former prefect of Suzhou—who was en route to assume his new post in the south. There were signs of a monetary exchange between them, though no further details had been uncovered.

With both secret letters laid out before him, Jiang Suizhou fell into deep thought.

A grave expression slowly settled over his face.

After connecting the dots between all these scraps of information, he felt reasonably confident about a few things. First, Pang Shao must have already begun quietly searching for a more obedient replacement for Lou Yue's position. The replacement didn't need to be an exceptional general either—just as long as he was willing to take orders from Pang Shao.

Then there was Fang Zhaohe.

If Jiang Suizhou remembered correctly, historical records noted that Fang Zhaohe accepted bribes and embezzled ridiculous amounts of silver. Later this year, sometime following autumn, his entire family would be executed by beheading. At least, that was how the original version went.

Yet now, for some reason, Fang Zhaohe was on his way to Lingnan to take up a new post. Though it seemed like a demotion on the surface, Lingnan was the very region Lou Yue was originally tasked with defending.

Pang Shao must have already bought off Fang Zhaohe. In exchange for his life, he became yet another pawn in the scheme Pang Shao was orchestrating to trap and bring down Lou Yue.

So, the next question became what exactly did this person plan to do in Lingnan?

Jiang Suizhou contemplated this silently for a moment, but there simply wasn't enough information to answer it yet. Thus, he instructed Xu Du to dispatch a team to Lingnan in order to evaluate the situation immediately.

Heeding the command, Xu Du withdrew from the room, leaving Jiang Suizhou alone in the study. Still lost in thought, he put away the two letters before composing a response to Qi Min.

All of the offenses listed in Pang Shao's letter were relatively minor and superficial, despite the sheer number of them. Ultimately, they would amount to nothing more than a harsh scolding for Lou Yue. Most likely, Pang Shao's real aim was to use this as an opportunity to feel out where Qi Min stood.

Given the circumstances, it might not be a bad idea for Qi Min to offer Pang Shao a token gesture of loyalty—just enough to make Pang Shao believe that they were in the same boat and that Qi Min was willing to set aside past grievances for the time being so they could take down Lou Yue together. That way, Pang Shao might lower his guard and reveal some important information to Qi Min in the interest of advancing his plan.

Obtaining that information would be incredibly useful.

Once Jiang Suizhou was done writing his reply, he read over it again while blowing on the ink.

He sighed as he waited for it to dry.

Lou Yue had rejected Huo Wujiu, and Huo Wujiu had allowed him to do so; he hadn't tried to force the matter.

Right now, however, Jiang Suizhou wanted nothing more than to use the letters he had just received as leverage to pressure Lou Yue. After all, he had clear evidence that Pang Shao was already weaving a vast and intricate trap. If Lou Yue continued to hesitate until Pang Shao succeeded in framing him, giving the emperor reason to strip him of his military command and convict him of those charges, then the situation would be past the point of no return.

Jiang Suizhou knew that threatening Lou Yue was the only path forward here.

And it was a task only he could undertake. More importantly, he had to carry it out in secret, without Huo Wujiu's knowledge—only then could he prevent a rift from forming between Lou Yue and Huo Wujiu.

Unfortunately, this would almost certainly affect Lou Yue's view of Jiang Suizhou moving forward…but…

Jiang Suizhou folded the letter, his expression unreadable.

So be it. Let him think whatever he wanted of him.

***

As expected, fierce arguments broke out again in court during the next Grand Assembly.

Just as Pang Shao had hoped and planned for, Qi Min also began to loathe Lou Yue. He submitted a ruthless memorial detailing all of Lou Yue's offenses, exactly as listed in the letter Pang Shao had provided him. Thus, he successfully sparked the emperor's fury.

Naturally, the emperor had no interest in Lou Yue's daily affairs. What he truly wanted to know was why Lou Yue had the audacity to act on his own and more specifically why he'd sent the women who were meant for the palace back to Yangzhou.

As a result, the emperor flew into a rage, and officials from both Pang Shao's and Qi Min's factions were quick to add fuel to the fire. Outnumbered and overwhelmed, Lou Yue found himself flushed and speechless under their rebukes. Even after the assembly ended, the color didn't leave his face.

From beginning to end, Jiang Suizhou observed coolly from the sidelines.

He knew this turn of events would create the perfect opportunity to negotiate with Lou Yue. After being freshly spurned by the rest of the imperial court, Lou Yue had to be aware of the precarious position he was in. That meant he would be more open to Jiang Suizhou's persuasion and more likely to side with Huo Wujiu.

Jiang Suizhou was about 90 percent certain things would go his way.

With that in mind, he began to carefully consider how to phrase his arguments. It wasn't until the assembly adjourned and the other officials were already on their way out of Guangyuan Hall, satisfied with the results, that Jiang Suizhou finally started moving. He caught up with Lou Yue, who understandably trailed behind the rest of the group.

"General Lou! A moment, please!" he called.

Hearing his name, Lou Yue turned to see that sickly but quite polite Prince of Jing a few steps behind him—the same person who'd welcomed him outside the city the other day.

Lou Yue stopped walking and waited patiently for Jiang Suizhou to catch up with him. Jiang Suizhou reached his side soon enough, and Lou Yue cupped his hands respectfully.

"What guidance do you have for me, Your Highness?" Lou Yue asked, naturally falling into step alongside him.

"Guidance? I'm not so sure I'd call it that," Jiang Suizhou said in a deliberately even voice. "But I must say, after what transpired today… Well, it certainly doesn't bode well for General Lou, I fear."

He paused to give Lou Yue time to react to his opening remark. After the general agreed, Jiang Suizhou would proceed with his carefully planned speech.

Annoyance flickered across Lou Yue's face at the mention of the day's events before he sighed.

"Yes, you seem to be correct. I know I've been away from the court for several years, but I just can't believe Qi Min would conspire with Pang Shao." He didn't go on to further elaborate his thoughts, and instead, to Jiang Suizhou's utter surprise, continued with "Still, I must express my gratitude, Your Highness, for staying behind just to offer me comfort."

With that, Jiang Suizhou found himself unable to continue.

That…was most certainly not why he'd joined him here. He was supposed to be threatening Lou Yue!

But Lou Yue went on, without giving Jiang Suizhou a chance to interject.

"Your Highness, I can tell you're truly a good person! Your compassionate treatment of that boy Huo Wujiu alone reveals how kindhearted you are!" he gushed. "Thank goodness he had you!"

He grew increasingly fired up as he spoke, until it was almost as if he saw Jiang Suizhou as a trusted confidant.

"But you aren't just Huo Wujiu's benefactor—you're Wanjun's as well!" he continued. "You know, I always thought they'd make a great

match. Even when they were kids, that free-spirited little Wanjun chose to trail after Huo Wujiu like she was his shadow! Tell me, Your Highness, could this be anything less than a destined connection ordained by the heavens?!”

In the end, all of Jiang Suizhou’s cunning schemes and careful plans were discarded in the face of Lou Yue’s incessant rambling.

Despite the bitter taste that lingered on his tongue and the sour pang of jealousy that gnawed at his chest, all he could do was smile and nod politely. He couldn’t let any of it show on his face.

He spent most of the conversation grinding his teeth so hard it felt like they could crack.

Forget it! he thought to himself in a fit of anger. To think he’d been so worried about damaging Huo Wujiu and Lou Yue’s relationship that he insisted on playing the villain himself!

If this was how things were going to be, he might as well just wash his hands of it completely and let Huo Wujiu figure it out on his own.

Chapter 84

FOR ALL HIS PRIVATE THREATS and tantrums, Jiang Suizhou realized that he couldn't actually throw in the towel now. He knew that the more highly Lou Yue regarded Huo Wujiu, the harder it would be for Jiang Suizhou to do anything that might damage their relationship.

He listened to Lou Yue ramble on about the same topic all the way back to the palace gates. Only then did Lou Yue reluctantly stop talking.

"I truly do feel a certain rapport with you, Your Highness—though I've kept you listening to my idle chatter for too long." He sheepishly scratched the back of his head.

Jiang Suizhou smiled politely.

"It's fine. I can tell that you're a truly doting father," he remarked blandly. He paused, then continued in a much more pointed manner. "Still, General, while settling one's scores quickly is a good thing, if you end up incurring too much wrath and terror, even your daughter's safety may not be guaranteed, let alone an ideal marriage."

Lou Yue's smile stiffened and froze grimly on his face.

"What are you saying, Your Highness?"

Jiang Suizhou averted his gaze and surveyed their surroundings before lowering his voice to explain. "I've obtained some intel concerning you. You must not know that Pang Shao and his allies are already plotting to drive your entire family to their doom."

This revelation stunned Lou Yue into silence for a moment before rage overtook him.

"I knew it!" he hissed, his voice low but heavy with fury. "That conniving snake has been pretending to be weak these past few days, but he was scheming behind my back all along! Many thanks for letting me know, Your Highness! I won't let him get away with it!"

Jiang Suizhou let out a humorless laugh.

Although Lou Yue was a master when it came to commanding troops and waging war, he was far too straightforward and reckless off the battlefield. If Jiang Suizhou didn't rein him in, Lou Yue would most likely storm the Pang residence right now, spear in hand, and try to smash down the main gate.

"General, you don't even know what Pang Shao has been scheming yet," Jiang Suizhou said. "If he intends to eliminate someone without leaving a trace, what chance do you have of stopping him?"

Lou Yue stopped in his tracks.

He'd gotten carried away. Thanks to the Prince of Jing's reminder, he also realized that he was acting openly while Pang Shao was working from the shadows, leaving him with almost no chance of outmaneuvering him.

"Then…" Lou Yue hesitated briefly, his voice faltering. "Do you have any suggestions to share, Your Highness?"

"Not only do I have a suggestion," Jiang Suizhou said, "I have a plan."

With a faint smile and a lazy flick of his tail, the fox allowed his pure and kindhearted mask to slip ever so slightly.

"In that case…" He hesitantly trailed off at the sight of Jiang Suizhou's expression, even though at first, he had intended to thank him.

"Now, I will need to ask for your assistance with something," Jiang Suizhou said. "But you needn't worry, General. I'll have a messenger deliver the meeting time and location to your residence. If you're willing to join me, we can continue this conversation somewhere quiet and private, and I'll bring what leverage I have."

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Lou Yue agreed to Jiang Suizhou's proposal. As they parted ways, he glanced at Jiang Suizhou with a complicated look in his eyes that wasn't there before.

Jiang Suizhou noticed, of course, but chose to pretend otherwise.

Lou Yue was free to assume whatever he wanted. At this point, Jiang Suizhou had little choice in the matter. This was all he could do.

If he gave Lou Yue his help with no strings attached, then he couldn't count on Lou Yue to make the difficult choices he'd be faced with in the coming days. His sense of duty to his country still weighed on him too heavily to trust in that. Lou Yue had to be backed into a corner, or else he'd never make up his mind. He would only be willing to make sacrifices if he knew in his heart of hearts that there was no other way out. Only then, with all other routes cut off, would he choose a side.

It didn't matter what he thought of Jiang Suizhou afterward. It had to be done.

So be it, Jiang Suizhou told himself. *It is what it is.*

Still, it wasn't exactly a nice feeling to be misunderstood so fundamentally, especially by someone who was originally on friendly terms with him.

Jiang Suizhou got into the carriage and swiftly departed for his residence. As soon as he returned, he summoned Xu Du and Gu Changyun to his room to discuss the next steps. Together, they agreed upon an appropriate time and location, and then one of Xu Du's elite guards covertly delivered the message to Lou Yue's residence.

They scheduled it for later that same day around dusk at the Jinyu Pavilion—one of Lin'an's renowned restaurants. Although the venue attracted many guests, it was also a frequent meeting spot for important officials and merchants, so they shouldn't draw too much attention. Additionally, Xu Du confirmed that Pang Shao would be attending a banquet at Mingfeng Tower at the same time, which meant they were unlikely to encounter anyone from his faction.

Once everything was settled and Gu Changyun had reserved a private room at Jinyu Pavilion under his name, Jiang Suizhou quietly waited for nightfall.

The sun began to set.

After changing into his everyday attire, he gathered all the evidence he'd recently acquired, then prepared to leave with Gu Changyun.

Right at that moment, the door opened.

Jiang Suizhou looked up to see Wei Kai standing in the doorway, peering cautiously in his direction.

“Your Highness, Madam Huo wishes to speak with you.”

Jiang Suizhou hesitated. He was already fully dressed and ready to leave. His excuse for today involved taking Gu Changyun out for drinks and merriment, and he didn’t wish to make Gu Changyun wait even longer, nor delay the carriage already stationed outside.

“Go tell Madam Huo I’ll talk to him once I’m back.”

The very moment the words left Jiang Suizhou’s mouth, Wei Kai suddenly staggered forward as if forcefully shoved from behind.

Huo Wujiu took his place in the doorway, seated in his wheelchair.

His expression was somewhat inscrutable as a whole, but his frown seemed a good indicator that he wasn’t particularly pleased.

By the time Jiang Suizhou recovered from his surprise, Huo Wujiu had already pushed Wei Kai aside, wheeled himself into the room, and closed the door behind him.

“Where are you going?” Huo Wujiu asked.

“Nowhere really,” Jiang Suizhou began. “Gu Changyun just wanted to—”

“Don’t give me that,” Huo Wujiu said, cutting him off. “Are you seriously trying to feed me the same excuses you use to fool others?”

Huo Wujiu’s cold gaze lingered briefly on Gu Changyun’s face before shifting back to Jiang Suizhou.

“You were in discussion with the two of them for so long today, and now you’re heading out. What am I not allowed to know?”

His aggressive questioning perhaps came off as unnecessarily harsh, but in truth, Huo Wujiu had been waiting for Jiang Suizhou the entire day.

He’d noticed early on that Jiang Suizhou was up to something—why else would the main hall have grown so lively? He expected Jiang Suizhou to drop by at some point to talk to him about his plans, as he always did… but he never showed up.

After anxiously waiting all day, Huo Wujiu finally ran out of patience.

He had no idea what Jiang Suizhou was keeping from him or why. All he knew was that he had to catch Jiang Suizhou before he left and get to the bottom of the matter.

Jiang Suizhou, for his part, instantly understood that the jig was up. Seeing that he had no choice but to come clean, he drew a deep breath.

“I’m meeting with General Lou,” he said succinctly. “It’s a small matter, really. Just some business to discuss.”

Huo Wujiu wheeled himself closer, then gestured toward the documents in Jiang Suizhou’s hands.

“Give them to me.”

Reluctantly, Jiang Suizhou handed over the compiled evidence.

Gu Changyun stared at the two of them, dumbfounded.

Since when was His Highness so obedient to Madam Huo? And for that matter…since when did Huo Wujiu display his thoughts and emotions so vividly?

As stern as Huo Wujiu seemed—and his tone was quite harsh, indeed—there was a look of helpless exasperation in his eyes as he gazed up at the Prince of Jing.

With the two of them facing each other in close quarters, it really did feel like there might be something more going on between them.

Huo Wujiu paid no attention to Gu Changyun. He took the letters and skimmed through them quickly. Setting them down on his knees, he quickly shifted his attention back to Jiang Suizhou.

“What are you planning to do? Warn him or threaten him?”

He phrased it as a question, but Jiang Suizhou could tell that he had already guessed his intentions.

Sure enough, Huo Wujiu didn’t even bother to let him respond before he continued, “Do you really think Lou Yue is a pushover? That he’s so easy to scare? You’ve only known him for a few days. How can you be sure

what kind of person he is or what he'll do? Jiang Suizhou, you really do have some guts."

This was the first time Huo Wujiu had ever addressed him by his full name.

It was legitimately a bit startling.

"I have a few tricks up my sleeve," he muttered defiantly.

"So why didn't you tell me?" Huo Wujiu asked.

"You're close to him, and someday, you'll— I mean, given your history together, it's just better if you don't get personally involved."

Huo Wujiu didn't quite understand where Jiang Suizhou was going with this "someday" stuff, but that was the least of his concerns. He found the rest of his statement wildly frustrating.

It was one thing for Jiang Suizhou to insist on playing protector, but to go so far as to shield him from Lou Yue? What an absolute fool.

Huo Wujiu folded the letters and tucked them into his robe. He didn't want to waste any more time.

"Fine. Go ahead, then," he said, staring at Jiang Suizhou. "Wait for me."

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Of the four people sitting around the table in one of Jinyu Pavilion's inconspicuous private rooms, two were stunned silent—Lou Yue and Gu Changyun. For a good long while, no one said anything at all.

Gu Changyun was only there to provide an excuse for Jiang Suizhou to show up at this restaurant. Attending alongside him was supposed to be an easy and uneventful task, nothing more than a small favor. Yet, to his surprise, he ended up witnessing a truly astonishing scene this evening.

By the time Gu Changyun arrived at the restaurant with the Prince of Jing and stepped into the private room, Huo Wujiu was already there. While Gu Changyun had heard him tell His Highness to wait for him, he never imagined that meant "at the pavilion."

Even more astonishing, Huo Wujiu's legs appeared to be fully healed. When they opened the door, they were greeted by the sight of him just standing there tall and steady on both legs, looking dignified and commanding.

He exchanged a single glance with Huo Wujiu, and a cold unease rippled through him.

At some point in time, this person had changed. He was no longer the pitiful, disabled man who silently allowed others to push him around; he had once again become that formidable general who could snap someone's neck with one hand. And yet, it had happened so gradually that Gu Changyun hadn't noticed it at all. Even Pang Shao, who made such a spectacle at the imperial hunt, hadn't realized either.

Lou Yue's state of shock also involved Huo Wujiu's presence.

He had come fully prepared for a clash with the enigmatic Prince of Jing. Instead, his opponent was once again Huo Wujiu.

Lou Yue stared at him across the table with wide, fierce eyes, like a startled tiger. With one hand braced against his knee, Huo Wujiu gazed coolly back, his expression solemn.

And then there was the Prince of Jing, who sat quietly to the side. He actually looked a bit pitiful.

Huo Wujiu didn't bother exchanging any pleasantries.

"General Lou, sit."

He waved for the dishes to be served, then raised his cup and gestured for Lou Yue to take his seat.

Lou Yue's face darkened, but there was nothing he could do.

"Wujiu, just get to the point."

"Times have changed, General Lou. His Highness, the Prince of Jing, told you the same thing earlier today, didn't he?" Huo Wujiu said. "I don't believe you're in any position to refuse me anymore."

His voice was cold and unbefitting of someone who was genuinely here to negotiate. If anything, he was so aggressive and unyielding that the only thing missing was an outright threat.

Riddled with anxiety, Jiang Suizhou watched their interaction unfold.

“How can you be so sure?” Lou Yue said indignantly. “You’re trying to force me to commit treason, Wujiu. Even your father didn’t go this far all those years ago.”

“I’m not the one forcing your hand here,” Huo Wujiu replied. “Pang Shao is.”

Lou Yue scoffed. “What can he do? No matter how much power he wields, he’s still just a civil official. I command hundreds of thousands of soldiers, with tens of thousands stationed right outside the city. You really think he can kill me that easily?”

“At the end of the day, those soldiers belong to Jiang Shunheng,” Huo Wujiu said evenly. “What if he takes them back from you?”

“Who else in this country can lead and command an army hundreds of thousands strong?”

“Pang Shao is already on the hunt for your replacement.”

“Then I’ll just shed my armor and retire!”

“He won’t allow you to go peacefully.”

“I have nothing to hide. Not once have I done anything that would dishonor Great Jing. What could he possibly do to me?”

“Pang Shao has already demonstrated that he’s more than capable of framing someone. Planting evidence is effortless for him.”

“Heh, well, his influence can only extend so far. You think he can lay a finger on me if I’m in Lingnan?”

“Considering the newly appointed governor-general of Lingnan is working for Pang Shao, what do you think?”

As the two traded a rapid-fire volley of retorts, neither displayed any sign of backing down. Although Lou Yue was naturally quite aggressive while speaking, Huo Wujiu met his barbs with his own composed, authoritative ripostes. Slowly the tension spread throughout the room like thick smoke from gunfire. It was so intense and suffocating that both Meng Qianshan and Wei Kai, who stood attentively nearby, broke out in a cold sweat.

The spar came to an abrupt end once Huo Wujiu loosed his last statement.

Lou Yue paused for a moment at that, frowning.

“…What did you say?”

With a victorious smirk, Huo Wujiu pulled out the letters from his robe and held them out to the side. Wei Kai quickly stepped forward and handed the letters to Lou Yue.

“Take a look for yourself,” Huo Wujiu said. “He’s already made his move. It won’t be long until your military authority is taken away and someone more pliable takes your place. After that, he can fabricate any charge he wishes. Embezzlement, negligence, dereliction of duty, even treason—all kinds of evidence will be sent back to Lin’an, under whatever pretense he chooses.”

As Lou Yue flipped through page after page, his hands gradually began to tremble, and his eyes grew red and glistened in the lamplight.

Jiang Suizhou could tell that Huo Wujiu’s plan was much the same as his own, in the end. He intended to corner Lou Yue, but he was far more ruthless in browbeating him into submission. In fact, his bold and brutal efficiency meant he showed no consideration for Lou Yue’s feelings, which in turn made Jiang Suizhou feel a bit sorry for him.

In the end, Lou Yue was still one of Southern Jing’s most loyal and outstanding generals. It must have been unbearably painful for him to watch this treasonous minister set a vicious and inescapable trap for him, knowing he was powerless to do anything about it.

“As long as Pang Shao remains in the imperial court, he will not rest until he is rid of you, General Lou,” Jiang Suizhou said gently. “He’s always been irredeemable in this way, and yet His Majesty’s trust in him runs deep. Don’t take it too personally. However, please understand that even though those soldiers are yours to command for now, there are countless methods to take them away from you.

“Those soldiers won’t be as reliable as you think. With a foolish emperor and treacherous minister pressing down on them from above, your men will inevitably fall into their hands sooner or later. When that happens, your family won’t be the only ones to suffer. The nation will crumble in

your absence, and the common people will bear the brunt of it. It's only a matter of time."

Some time passed before Lou Yue finally took a deep breath and placed the letters back on the table.

"I know, Your Highness." Lou Yue did his best to keep his voice steady as he turned his gaze to Huo Wujiu. "If I die, it is not worth grieving over, but I will not let Wanjun be dragged down with me."

Huo Wujiu gave a faint, knowing smile.

Lou Wanjun's mother was Lou Yue's first love from his youth. She died giving birth to Lou Wanjun, who then became Lou Yue's entire world.

"If I choose this path, I'll become a turncoat general. At that point, a ruined reputation is the least of my concerns. One careless moment is all it takes, and I could die," Lou Yue said quietly, gazing intently at Huo Wujiu. "My death is of no consequence, but Wanjun must not end up alone with no one by her side."

Huo Wujiu frowned again.

What next? Was Lou Yue expecting him to play matchmaker for her or something?

Lou Yue took another deep breath.

"I only have one condition for my agreement," he said. "Promise me that you'll take Wanjun as your wife and that you'll never betray her trust for as long as you live."

Jiang Suizhou's stomach dropped, and he looked over at Huo Wujiu in silent horror. His mind went blank, and though his mouth fell open slightly, no words came out.

He wanted to say something to stop Lou Yue, but he had no right to. All he could do was curse his own lack of resolve—he should have stopped Huo Wujiu from accompanying him, no matter what. He should've just come alone to have it out with Lou Yue as he'd intended. The regret weighed on him so heavily that his chest ached and throbbed.

And now…there was no turning back.

His vision blurred slightly. His body felt as if it were slowly turning hollow.

While Jiang Suizhou suffered inwardly, Huo Wujiu seemed only briefly caught off guard by the request. A beat later, he leaned back in his chair and smirked, sharp-edged and icy.

“General Lou, you drive a hard bargain,” he said. “But not even my father would have had the final say on something like this. Bearing that in mind, I must kindly advise you to back off.”

Chapter 85

NOW THE SITUATION FELT even more surreal to Jiang Suizhou.

He stared dumbly at Huo Wujiu, who remained lounged back in his chair, watching Lou Yue with a calm, unfazed expression.

Based on the original course of history, Huo Wujiu had no reason to refuse Lou Yue's request.

Was reality actually completely different from what Jiang Suizhou had read in the historical records?

Before Jiang Suizhou could gather his thoughts, Lou Yue made his own opinions known loud and clear.

"You… You scoundrel!" he raged. "You can't—"

"Have you asked Lou Wanjun what she wants?" Huo Wujiu crossed his arms and glowered slightly at him. "Why are you making these one-sided arrangements for her?"

"No, but she definitely—"

"Then you've got it all wrong," Huo Wujiu interjected bluntly. "We've disliked each other since we were kids. Even now, that hasn't changed. You're just a crotchety old general who's spent his whole life in the army. You should stick to fighting wars. Where do you get off trying to play matchmaker for that girl?"

He certainly didn't beat around the bush. This concise dressing-down rendered Lou Yue momentarily speechless.

"But…"

"General Lou, you know what kind of person I am," Huo Wujiu continued. "If you force us to be together, you'll be making enemies instead of a wedded couple. The outcome will be the opposite of what you're hoping for."

Lou Yue sheepishly fell silent.

Jiang Suizhou, meanwhile, felt utterly rejuvenated and reassured. The fear and tension that gripped his entire body began to gradually dissolve. He felt like he could finally relax, almost like he were a survivor of some terrible disaster.

However, he also knew that he couldn't let himself grow careless just because of a few personal feelings. This was still a crucial moment in their negotiations with Lou Yue.

He refocused. The dismay on Lou Yue's face, along with his silence, made it clear that he knew he was at a disadvantage. Jiang Suizhou immediately seized the chance to drive in the final nail.

"General Lou, you fear that future historians will criticize you for your indecision and betrayal," he said firmly, "but wouldn't they just as easily condemn you for your unwise sentimentality? Tell me, is it befitting of a great general to use his daughter's marriage prospects as a bargaining chip? Either way, your reasoning doesn't hold."

Lou Yue looked at him for a long moment.

"You do have a point there," he admitted quietly.

"So if you still choose not to rebel, all that's left is to sit around and wait for death, like meat on the chopping block," said Jiang Suizhou.

"Why are you afraid of some historians?" Huo Wujiu cut in, frowning. "Whatever they might criticize you for, who cares? Written or spoken, what harm can come from a bit of criticism?"

"Besides, I'd argue it's no longer even a question of treason," Jiang Suizhou added. "Dynasties rise and fall, just like the sun and moon. It's an unchanging cycle. I mean, wasn't this dynasty itself founded by those who rose up to overthrow the previous sovereign? And didn't the current emperor of Northern Liang also come from the Jiang family's retainers who chose to rebel? A thousand years from now, if historians mention this at all, it will simply be seen as another case of 'out with the old, in with the new.'"

His words were full of conviction, and Lou Yue seemed to mull them over for a while.

When Lou Yue finally spoke, he turned to Huo Wujiu.

“Look at this! Just look at this!” He viciously jabbed his chopsticks in Huo Wujiu’s direction. “You’ve stayed at the Prince of Jing’s residence for this long, yet you still behave like a common bandit! How come you haven’t you picked up a single shred of manners or decency from this noble young man? I’m appalled that you would dare speak to your elders like that!”

Jiang Suizhou let out a long sigh of relief at Lou Yue’s outburst.

His reaction proved he had been persuaded.

As Jiang Suizhou glanced over at Huo Wujiu, his eyes brimmed with mirth and pleasant surprise. At the same time, Huo Wujiu also tilted his head to look at him. Though his face remained mostly expressionless, his gaze contained an unfathomable depth.

They shared a brief look. Then Huo Wujiu’s mouth curved into a lopsided smile, and he laughed.

“I thought you despised those pedantic scholars?” he asked Lou Yue.

“As if His Highness the Prince of Jing is the same as those conniving windbags,” Lou Yue muttered, stabbing his chopsticks into a plate of vegetables.

Huo Wujiu replied to him, but his eyes were focused on Jiang Suizhou.

“Indeed, he’s not,” he said.

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Even though the most stressful part was over, Jiang Suizhou still couldn’t wrap his head around why reality had turned out so different from the historical records. After dinner that evening, he found himself lost in thought, trying to figure it out.

In the dark alley behind the restaurant, Huo Wujiu slipped into the waiting carriage and saw Jiang Suizhou sitting inside, looking particularly quiet and thoughtful.

“What’s on your mind?” Huo Wujiu asked.

“Why did you reject General Lou’s request?” Jiang Suizhou blurted out.

“Because I didn’t want to do it,” Huo Wujiu answered, a bit perplexed. “What other reason do I need?”

“But Miss Lou…” Belatedly, Jiang Suizhou realized that his comment was wildly inappropriate, and he stopped abruptly.

There was no way he could tell Huo Wujiu what he was actually thinking: *But Miss Lou is the one you’re meant to be with in the future.*

The first few words *had* slipped out, but he had caught himself just in time.

“What about her?” Huo Wujiu asked, confused.

“She’s…pretty good,” Jiang Suizhou said vaguely.

To his surprise, Huo Wujiu’s expression darkened.

“Yeah? What’s so good about her?”

His sharp tone instantly set Jiang Suizhou on alert, and he turned quickly to see Huo Wujiu sitting tall and rigid, brows furrowed. He was, in a word, displeased.

“Seriously, what is it you see in her? Her looks? She’s all right. Nothing special. And I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but she acts like a guy half the time. Her temper’s terrible too. You think she’s some lovely maiden because she’s all friendly and sweet with you? You think she’s actually a good person? She’s not. Did you know that by the time she was around seven or eight, she was already chasing around Wei Kai and the others, trying to beat them up? What a mess. Just remembering it gives me a headache. I’ve never seen…”

Huo Wujiu went on and on, leaving Jiang Suizhou stunned. He had never heard Huo Wujiu speak so swiftly before, and suddenly here he was rattling off a flurry of words in quick succession.

…And it was for the sole purpose of bad-mouthing someone.

Jiang Suizhou had never been the type to speak ill of others behind their backs. He felt a bit guilty just listening to Huo Wujiu continue like that, and he swiftly cut him off.

“All right, I get it. You don’t like her—no need to go on.”

But Huo Wujiu didn’t relent in the slightest. There was an intensity in his gaze that felt just short of overbearing when he looked at Jiang Suizhou.

“Of course I don’t like her,” he said. “Listen to me—you’d better open your eyes too. Don’t you dare go and fall for her.”

“I… What?” Jiang Suizhou asked, gaping at him in astonishment. “What are you talking about? I don’t feel that way about Miss Lou. Not in the slightest.”

Silence descended upon the carriage. For a moment, they just stared blankly at each other without speaking.

All that remained was the sound of wheels grinding against the ground as the carriage swayed gently.

Suddenly, Jiang Suizhou laughed.

“Why would you think that I did?” he asked.

Huo Wujiu opened his mouth, then closed it. He averted his eyes guiltily.

“Weren’t you also under the impression that I liked her?”

“Well, you did grow up together…”

“Wei Kai and I grew up together too,” Huo Wujiu said, frowning.

Jiang Suizhou couldn’t help but burst out laughing again.

“Why are you laughing?” Huo Wujiu grumbled. “That’s just how it is. Just because we grew up together doesn’t mean I have to like her.”

Jiang Suizhou nodded, still smiling. “Sure, sure. I understand.”

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When Huo Wujiu returned to his room, the first thing he did was summon Wei Kai.

“I think I’ve discovered something,” he said, his expression grave. “But I’m still not completely sure whether my interpretation is correct.”

When Wei Kai heard Huo Wujiu say that, he immediately perked up and assumed an equally serious expression. Coincidentally, he'd received an important letter earlier that day, and he was eager to discuss it.

"Do tell, General."

Huo Wujiu took a moment to gather his thoughts.

"Why do I get the feeling," he said slowly, "that the Prince of Jing also feels a certain way about me?"

Wei Kai was dumbfounded. In an instant, all of the tension coiled inside him unraveled.

Under the candlelight, General Huo's face was stern, as if facing a formidable enemy. If only he hadn't opened his mouth, it would have been easy to believe he was pondering important military strategies and plans.

"Ah…General," Wei Kai began hesitantly.

"When he smiled at me in the carriage," Huo Wujiu interrupted, "something felt off."

You're the one who's off, sir… Wei Kai thought.

He didn't believe him for a second. He figured his general was just starting to lose his mind from all the unrequited longing.

"Go sniff around. See if you can figure out…" Huo Wujiu paused. "Actually, no. No, I should just talk to him directly."

"General, you mustn't!"

Huo Wujiu frowned at him. "Why not?"

Wei Kai swallowed all the things he actually wanted to say. After hesitating for a moment, he had no choice but to dodge the question by bringing up the secret letter he'd received instead.

"Perhaps you should look at this first, General," Wei Kai said. "It just arrived; one of our men in the city sent it over urgently. He said that it concerns something critically important and that you should read it as soon as possible."

Huo Wujiu stared at him for a while longer, still frowning. Though clearly a bit displeased, he took the letter from him and opened it.

According to the letter, Pang Shao's son, Pang Wei, had left the capital earlier today, heading due south. On its own, this information didn't mean much, but apparently the Pang family had gone to great lengths to smuggle him out of the city. They'd even hired a number of guards to ensure his safety.

Huo Wujiu read through the letter several times. That was quite unusual, indeed.

"Have someone tail him," he ordered. "Find out where he's headed and what he's up to."

"Yes, sir," Wei Kai replied. "Did you pick up on something, General?"

"Not from this letter alone," Huo Wujiu answered, his expression darkening. "But Pang Shao has been keeping an eye on Lou Yue lately, and he's been sending his subordinates to Lingnan. If he's sent his son there as well… That can't mean anything good."

At that moment, the door burst open.

They both looked over to see Jiang Suizhou standing in the doorway with Meng Qianshan.

Under the glow of the lanterns in the corridor, Jiang Suizhou's face appeared a little paler than usual. He was still in his robes from earlier, as if he hadn't had time to change.

He was holding something in his hands, but he didn't move. He just stared at Huo Wujiu, wide-eyed.

"What's wrong?" Huo Wujiu asked, his brow wrinkling hard.

He took a few hasty steps forward before he suddenly remembered he couldn't risk any nearby servants catching a glimpse of him doing so. Frustrated, he turned around and sat back in his wheelchair. Then he swiftly wheeled himself to the doorway, pulled Jiang Suizhou into the room, and closed the door behind them.

Jiang Suizhou's lips trembled as he clutched tightly at the tiny, rolled-up slip of paper in his hands. Instantly, Huo Wujiu recognized it as a message delivered by pigeon.

"…Something happened." There was a quaver in his voice, and he seemed lost.

Huo Wujiu had never seen him like this before.

Like a clenched fist, fear gripped Huo Wujiu's heart, uncomfortably tight and suffocating. It squeezed tighter and tighter until he could bear it no longer, and he sprang up from the wheelchair. Without giving Jiang Suizhou a chance to refuse, he tugged him over to a nearby couch and sat him down before taking the paper and unfurling it.

Only a few words were scrawled across the paper, but that didn't make the message any less shocking.

Fang Zhaohe has succeeded in defection.

Huo Wujiu looked at Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou raised his head, his face ashen.

"Fang Zhaohe has already arrived in Lingnan. Using Pang Shao's money, he successfully persuaded Chen Jun to defect," he said slowly. "Chen Jun is the commanding officer that General Lou left in charge of Lingnan—in other words, he currently commands all three hundred thousand soldiers General Lou left behind in Lingnan. Those soldiers are about to become Pang Shao's men."

Huo Wujiu lowered his gaze.

"If the commanding officer has already switched sides, it'll be easy enough to take control of the rest of the troops as well. He receives an imperial decree, then presents his distorted version of the order to deceive the soldiers under him before marching them off to war. It doesn't get much easier than that," he said.

"Then…there really is no stopping him," Jiang Suizhou murmured.

"So Pang Shao sent Pang Wei out of the city today specifically to meet up with them in Lingnan?" Huo Wujiu asked.

It took Jiang Suizhou a moment to respond hoarsely, "What? He sent his son away?"

Huo Wujiu nodded.

“…That means he’s truly about to make his move.” Jiang Suizhou drew a deep breath.

“According to my spies, Lingnan has been showing signs of an impending locust plague,” he continued, “yet Fang Zhaohe remains silent about it. He’s taken no action—in fact, he hasn’t offered any relief or compensation to the people at all. I fear he means to use the natural disaster to plunge Lingnan into turmoil. Once refugees begin to flee the city, he’ll fabricate a rebellion and use it as a pretext to lead the troops into Lin’an. If this goes according to plan, Pang Shao will either declare himself emperor or rally his faction behind a new one.”

Jiang Suizhou was doing his best to appear calm, but his throat tightened, and the quiver in his voice was unmistakable.

The furrow in Huo Wujiu’s brow deepened. With his gaze downcast, he began silently contemplating countermeasures and their chances of success.

Jiang Suizhou paused, then spoke again.

“The locusts will set in quickly. It’ll likely be less than half a month before Pang Shao raises his troops,” he said in a hollow voice. “And it’s my fault. It’s all because I insisted on driving a wedge between Pang Shao and Jiang Shunheng. My actions pushed Pang Shao to the brink. That’s why he’s resorting to this last desperate move, why he intends to recklessly fight to the bitter end. Not only will Lingnan be stricken by disaster, all of Southern Jing will suffer. It’s all my fault…everything… This is my fault…”

As he spoke, his voice grew increasingly strangled with overwhelming emotion.

Huo Wujiu didn’t understand where Jiang Suizhou’s self-blame was coming from. All he knew was that if this fool tried to carry the entire weight of the world on his shoulders, he would surely collapse beneath it.

Swiftly, he pressed his hand against the back of Jiang Suizhou’s head and tugged him into his arms.

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “Besides, you have me. What’s there to be afraid of?”

Chapter 86

JIANG SUIZHOU HADN'T EXPECTED Huo Wujiu to suddenly pull him into his arms. He stumbled forward from the momentum and collided against Huo Wujiu's chest.

His embrace was solid and unyielding. An inexplicable sense of safety and calm briefly washed over Jiang Suizhou at his touch, despite the urgency of the moment.

This was the first time in his life he'd experienced such panic, to the point that he was utterly lost and floundering.

In the past, even as Pang Shao steadily gained ground and the emperor remained a relentless, aggressive presence, he'd never panicked like this. That was because he understood them—he knew exactly what leverage they held and was confident he could handle the situation. Everything had always been within his control.

But now, the butterfly effect of Jiang Suizhou's presence had forever changed the course of history. No matter how much he strategized and plotted, he couldn't stop this version of Pang Shao who'd already lost faith in the emperor and was determined to raze everything to the ground.

He sniffled quietly.

"But…" Jiang Suizhou's voice emerged as a low hum, encouraged by Huo Wujiu's warm, reassuring palm pressing against the back of his head. "In less than half a month, Southern Jing will be thrown into chaos. Even if we surround the city and kill Pang Shao right now, it will be difficult to stop his plan."

Huo Wujiu was silent for a moment. Then, he appeared to reach a decision.

"I have a way to get more soldiers," he said. "Do you trust me?"

Jiang Suizhou didn't respond immediately, nor did he move.

Huo Wujiu clicked his tongue a bit impatiently.

“I’m asking you a question,” he chided in an unexpectedly light tone, as if he truly feared nothing.

“But…”

“No buts,” Huo Wujiu said. “Do you trust me, yes or no?”

Jiang Suizhou paused. This was essentially coercion.

“Yes. Happy now?” he answered reluctantly. “Now tell me what you’re planning to do.”

“Don’t you worry about that right now,” Huo Wujiu said, gently releasing him.

As the warmth suddenly vanished from the side of his face and the back of his head, Jiang Suizhou felt strangely empty, like he’d lost his support.

He looked up at Huo Wujiu, who gazed down at him.

“You said I have your trust,” Huo Wujiu said. “So go to bed and get some rest.”

“But you made me say that…”

“Go to bed,” Huo Wujiu repeated firmly. “I’m going out for a while. By the time you wake up tomorrow, I’ll have an answer for you, all right?”

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Once Huo Wujiu finally managed to coax Jiang Suizhou into returning to his room, he and Wei Kai headed straight to Lou Yue’s residence.

He wasn’t nearly as calm and composed as he’d made himself out to be in front of Jiang Suizhou.

Slipping into Lou Yue’s manor uninvited, he went straight to the man’s living quarters and hauled him upright in bed. Lou Yue was still groggy when he opened his eyes to find Huo Wujiu standing next to him, tall and imposing.

“You’re still sleeping?” Huo Wujiu railed. “That old fox Pang Shao has already taken over your stronghold, and you’re fast asleep!”

Lou Yue thought he must have been having a nightmare—at least until Lou Wanjun rushed in at the sound of the commotion and hastily lit the lamps, flooding the room with light. Only then did he see Wei Kai, visibly anxious, and Huo Wujiu, pacing in circles. That convinced him of this unfortunate reality.

“What happened? What did Pang Shao do?” Lou Yue quickly sat up.

“Remember all those soldiers you left in Lingnan? The Prince of Jing just received word that Fang Zhaohe—the man Pang Shao sent to Lingnan—has already turned them against you!” Huo Wujiu snarled. “In less than two weeks, they’ll have all the excuse they need to march on Lin’an.”

This felt even more surreal to Lou Yue.

“What more does Pang Shao want?!” he exclaimed. “Even with the emperor wrapped around his finger, he’s still not content?”

Huo Wujiu had no time to explain the deepening rift between Pang Shao and the emperor, nor all the relevant events that occurred over the past few weeks. Instead, he did his best to condense it succinctly.

“It may appear that way on the surface, but most likely, he’s aiming to kill two birds with one stone. In a single move, he can eliminate all opposition and pave the way for a new dynasty.”

Lou Yue was stunned.

“Then what do we do?” he asked, his voice tinged with genuine fear. “We can’t possibly hope to hold off three hundred thousand soldiers with just the fifty thousand we have here… Even with you out there with them, it’ll be like trying to empty the ocean with a spoon! Not only that: Lingnan isn’t far from Lin’an, and the road is lined with cities and towns. There’s nowhere suitable to fight!”

If a war actually broke out, it would drag on for at least a year and a half, at minimum. Even if they eventually won, how many lives would be lost in the process?

Lou Yue didn’t dare to imagine it.

“So, we have to strike first to seize the advantage,” Huo Wujiu said.

“You have a plan?” Lou Yue instantly asked.

Huo Wujiu contemplated briefly.

“It’s risky,” he said. “But at this point, our only option is to borrow Northern Liang’s soldiers.”

From that, Lou Yue realized Huo Wujiu had already made contact with Northern Liang, and he immediately let out a sigh of relief.

“That’s an excellent idea,” he said.

“However,” Huo Wujiu said, “I need to borrow some of your men—specifically, the light cavalry. As many of your fastest riders as I can get.”

“Why?”

Huo Wujiu looked at him, his voice deep and solemn. “Not everyone in Northern Liang is entirely trustworthy.”

“You mean…?” Lou Yue hesitated, unable to finish his sentence.

He’d always wondered how someone as capable as Huo Wujiu had been captured so easily. Either Southern Jing somehow knew to take precautions beforehand or someone in Northern Liang had double-crossed Huo Wujiu in secret.

Considering what Huo Wujiu had just said, it must have been the latter.

Huo Wujiu nodded. “It’s just a hunch.”

Lou Wanjun had been quietly listening the entire time. At this point, she finally spoke up with a frown.

“Then aren’t you basically marching to your death by going to them?”

“That’s why I need soldiers with me,” Huo Wujiu said. “In the coming days, you’ll need to make a proposal to Jiang Shunheng. Come up with any excuse you can to send a small number of troops to the banks of the Yangtze River. It doesn’t need to be a lot—he won’t stop you. Then I’ll take more men and lie in wait on the southern bank. If Northern Liang lets down their guard, we’ll take out the ringleader first. After that, I’ll take command of the remaining forces.”

“But how can you be sure they’ll bring soldiers across the river?” Lou Yue asked.

Huo Wujiu lifted his head and looked over at him.

“They’ll come.”

“If they want to help you, they’ll definitely come,” Lou Wanjun murmured. “And if they want you dead…they won’t let this chance slip by either. Right?”

Huo Wujiu nodded slowly.

Lou Yue paused in thought for a long time, then finally took a deep breath. “I will follow your plan.”

“There’s one more thing I must ask you to do for me,” Huo Wujiu said.

“What is it?”

Huo Wujiu gazed at him.

“It’s uncertain whether I will survive this journey, and the capital may not be safe either,” he said. “Pang Shao has been keeping a close eye on the Prince of Jing’s residence. If fighting breaks out on the riverbank, word will reach the capital.”

Lou Yue nodded.

“Your remaining soldiers must secure the imperial capital. You cannot allow any key figures to escape,” Huo Wujiu said.

“Of course. Don’t worry about that, but you must go and return quickly. All the neighboring counties have their own garrisons. If they decide to rush to Lin’an’s aid, we may not be able to hold our ground for very long.”

“Also…” Huo Wujiu dipped his head. “Regarding the Prince of Jing.”

Lou Yue was puzzled. “What about him?”

Huo Wujiu’s gaze suddenly grew heavy, filled with an unprecedented gravity and solemnity.

“Protect him at all costs. Should he suffer the tiniest scratch, I’ll have your head.”

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As the sun rose early the next morning, Lin’an seemed every bit as serene and splendid as ever. There was no sign of the turbulent undercurrents churning beneath its placid surface.

Nor was there any immediate change in the imperial court.

Lou Yue was still causing trouble, just as before; his overbearing and meddlesome nature remained unchanged. Only a few days earlier, he’d finished airing all his accusations against Pang Shao. Now, he launched into an unrestrained critique of Great Jing’s defense along the northern border. It was supposedly riddled with holes, and he argued that relying on the great river as a natural border was dangerously complacent, since the foreign threat was far from contained. Ultimately, Lou Yue claimed that this was all due to Pang Shao’s neglect of his duties. Perhaps he should even be suspected of embezzling from the national treasury.

By now, the emperor had been subjected to so many of Lou Yue’s tirades denouncing Pang Shao that he’d grown quite sick of both of them.

His head ached from Lou Yue’s loud voice, so he cut straight to the chase. “And what does my subject wish to do about this?”

“Naturally, we must strengthen our defenses and prepare for the unexpected,” Lou Yue boomed authoritatively, standing proudly as he addressed the emperor.

His voice echoed through the hall like a huge bell, and the emperor’s headache intensified.

Despite his unnecessary indulgences and preoccupation with frivolous pleasures, he was still keenly aware of how much silver sat in his coffers. He needed that money to support his lavish lifestyle, after all. There were so many expenses, like the care and keeping of his resident beauties at the palace, stocking the hunting grounds with all those exotic birds and

beasts… Where was he supposed to find the funds to waste on a bunch of useless soldiers and horses?

“Then allocate some men from your troops,” he grumbled, waving a hand dismissively. “Don’t you have fifty thousand stationed outside the city right now? Send five thousand for the time being.”

Lou Yue looked displeased. “But…”

“That’s final,” the emperor declared. “I can’t just conjure soldiers out of thin air. Your troops are going to be deployed sooner or later anyway. Sending them to the border now might even help you cut down on supply costs.”

With the emperor’s refusal to compromise, Lou Yue fell into an awkward silence.

And thus, the matter was settled.

The area outside the city buzzed with activity as the army mobilized a small contingent of soldiers. Meanwhile, at the Prince of Jing’s residence, Jiang Suizhou finally learned of Huo Wujiu’s plan.

But Huo Wujiu didn’t tell him everything.

He only told Jiang Suizhou that he’d sent a messenger bird to Li Sheng, the general defending Jiangbei. In a few days, Li Sheng would send roughly one hundred and fifty thousand soldiers across the river.

Huo Wujiu would accompany a portion of Lou Yue’s troops to the river and take command of Li Sheng’s men. Meanwhile, Lou Yue would surround the city with his remaining forces once he received word that Huo Wujiu was on his way back with reinforcements. The day those two hundred thousand soldiers encircled Lin’an would be the day Pang Shao and Jiang Shunheng met their end.

After securing the capital, they’d swiftly move on to Lingnan to prevent those three hundred thousand soldiers from marching on Lin’an. Finally, once they took down Pang Shao’s son and the traitorous general, the entirety of Southern Jing would be theirs.

Jiang Suizhou went over the plan meticulously in his mind. He couldn’t find any obvious flaws, but a sense of unease lingered within him nonetheless.

If it was so easy for Huo Wujiu to mobilize troops, why hadn't he proposed such a simple strategy sooner? And with his legs fully healed, no one could catch him now…yet he needed to sneak in among Lou Yue's five thousand soldiers? Why?

Some doubts remained in Jiang Suizhou's mind. As Huo Wujiu's departure drew closer, he felt increasingly nervous.

The day before Huo Wujiu was set to leave, Jiang Suizhou didn't return from the ministry office until almost nightfall.

Though he went back to Anyin Hall, he didn't head for the main room. Instead, he paused in the courtyard, then turned and made his way to Huo Wujiu's quarters.

When Jiang Suizhou entered, he found Huo Wujiu supervising as Wei Kai took stock of their supplies and gear. They weren't bringing much, so the task was quick work.

Hearing the door, Huo Wujiu glanced Jiang Suizhou's way and beckoned him over.

"Come in," he said. "What is it?"

"I just came to see how things are going," Jiang Suizhou said.

Huo Wujiu stood and walked over to pour him a cup of tea, only for Jiang Suizhou to stop him.

He looked at Huo Wujiu. After a moment of silence, he confessed, "I'm still a little worried…"

"Worried about what?" Huo Wujiu said with a chuckle. "We're going to have two hundred thousand soldiers. Even if Pang Shao had twice the troops he has now, there would be no reason to be afraid."

"That's not what I'm worried about," Jiang Suizhou said, frowning. "This is just conjecture, but…well, are you sure the soldiers of Northern Liang can be fully trusted?"

Huo Wujiu stilled, almost imperceptibly, but it only lasted for a split second.

Then he laughed again, softly.

“Those soldiers are all loyal to the Huo family. I can guarantee that. Don’t overthink it,” he said.

“But…”

“What?” Huo Wujiu cast him a languid glance. “Do you have nothing better to do but let your imagination run wild?”

Just as Jiang Suizhou opened his mouth to refute that allegation, Huo Wujiu’s hand closed around his wrist. He gave Wei Kai a quick wave—a signal of sorts.

“All right, that’s it. Let’s go find something to keep you busy,” said Huo Wujiu.

“Where are we going?” Jiang Suizhou quickly asked.

“Lou Yue is throwing a congratulatory feast for the army tonight, on the outskirts of the city. I’ll take you to check it out.”

Chapter 87

JIANG SUIZHOU HADN'T EXPECTED Huo Wujiu to take him straight to the top of the city walls.

As night fell, soldiers lit fires around their tents at the foot of the wall. The top of the wall was shrouded in darkness, leaving nothing visible. With practiced ease, Huo Wujiu found a gap in the guards' patrol and leaped up the wall, bringing Jiang Suizhou with him.

Those walls were immense; they were so tall that they fully cleaved the world within from the world without as if they were two separate realms.

Inside the walls, the city bustled with life, ablaze with light. Outside, the sprawling encampment appeared to be much more subdued at first glance.

Huo Wujiu sat down on the edge of the wall with Jiang Suizhou. Far below them, glowing campfires sent curls of smoke into the night air and cast a warm light over the scattered tents and laughing soldiers.

It was a different kind of liveliness from that of the city, but it was vibrant all the same. The soldiers didn't bother to lower their voices out here, and their jokes and laughter and idle chatter became a roar that seemed to bubble and roil, as if stirred by the flames.

The men sat directly on the ground with jars of liquor and dishes of food beside them. The aroma of the alcohol and roasted meat drifted upward, mingling with the smoke.

Jiang Suizhou looked down, feeling slightly dazed.

"Quite a spirited gathering," he remarked. "Are they like this every night?"

"Just tonight, because some of the troops are set to deploy starting tomorrow," Huo Wujiu said from beside him. "It's one of the army's rules."

He moved like someone used to sitting on the city wall. Though there was clearly over a hundred feet of open air beneath him, he swung his legs

back and forth with ease. At one point, he even lifted a leg and braced his foot against the edge of the wall.

In contrast, Jiang Suizhou was noticeably more nervous. After Huo Wujiu helped him sit down, he didn't dare move again.

"Starting tomorrow, they'll spend many days on the move, filled with toil and hardship," Jiang Suizhou said, looking toward Huo Wujiu. "Will you be departing with them?"

Huo Wujiu rested his arm on his knee and cast a sideways glance at Jiang Suizhou.

"Lou Yue has already sent over two sets of armor," he answered. "Wei Kai and I will infiltrate their ranks tomorrow."

"Won't they realize?" Jiang Suizhou asked.

"Ji Hongcheng is in charge. He's reliable. Don't worry."

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

"Now, *you*, on the other hand," Huo Wujiu continued pointedly. "You need to be careful. I'll make my trip there and back swiftly, and Lou Yue will remain in the city, but still… Stay safe. Don't let Pang Shao suspect anything."

"Okay," Jiang Suizhou agreed.

"Some of my men will stay behind in the city to protect you in the coming days. Tomorrow, one of them will sneak into the residence. Don't worry about him. He knows exactly what to do."

Jiang Suizhou nodded again.

"So…" He looked at Huo Wujiu. "It really won't be dangerous?"

Huo Wujiu gazed down at him.

He didn't dare tell him the truth.

He had no idea how many soldiers the other side would actually send, what their true intentions were, or what kind of person their commanding officer was.

There was vanishingly little he could be sure of, in fact. He couldn't even begin to guess at what his chances of victory were. The only thing he

knew for absolutely certain was that, no matter what, he wouldn’t leave Jiang Suizhou alone in such a dangerous situation for long.

He lifted a hand, wanting to touch Jiang Suizhou’s hair, but stopped before making contact.

“There won’t be any danger as long as you stay safe. Don’t worry,” he said firmly.

Jiang Suizhou watched him thoughtfully.

The version of himself from just a few months ago wouldn’t have been worried at all. Of course Huo Wujiu could do it. He was Great Liang’s leading general, nearly undefeated in battle. Even if he’d slipped up once, there wouldn’t be a second time. Nothing posed a problem to him.

But now…

Huo Wujiu was no longer just some untouchable historical figure, some fearsome godlike general. Huo Wujiu was a man.

And he was the man who held Jiang Suizhou’s heart.

After a long pause, he spoke slowly.

“Then you must keep your word,” he said. “Don’t lie to me.”

***

Early the next morning, the troops set out.

Huo Wujiu kept a very low profile and moved swiftly. Though Jiang Suizhou also got up early and hurried to Huo Wujiu’s room, he arrived to find a stranger already sitting in the wheelchair.

He was young, about the same height as Huo Wujiu. When Jiang Suizhou entered, the man looked him up and down, then briskly stood and bowed.

“You must be His Highness the Prince of Jing, correct? My name is Nie Yao. I’ve received a special order from General Huo to protect you.”

Jiang Suizhou was taken aback. It took him a moment to find his voice again.

“…He’s already gone?”

“Two hours ago, I personally escorted General Huo out of the city,” Nie Yao answered.

Jiang Suizhou lowered his gaze. A few seconds passed before he murmured quietly, “Oh, that early…”

Nie Yao nodded. “Yes. General Huo specifically instructed us not to disturb your rest.”

Jiang Suizhou gave him a forced smile. For some reason, even that felt difficult, as if the corners of his mouth were too heavy to lift.

“I see. Well, all you have to do is stay here,” he said politely. “I’ve already informed Meng Qianshan. You don’t need to worry about meals or clothing. If anything comes up, I’ll come to you.”

“Understood.” Nie Yao cupped his hands and bowed again, after which Jiang Suizhou turned and left the room.

As the door closed behind him, the morning breeze of early summer drifted past. It was light and gentle, yet he felt a little cold.

He glanced at the tightly shut door.

Suddenly, the reality of the situation sank in. For the first time ever since he’d transmigrated here, he was alone. From day one, Huo Wujiu had been by his side in some capacity…until now.

He hadn’t expected it to feel so strange. Somehow, the entire world seemed just a little emptier.

As if everything were perfectly normal, he made his way back to the main hall.

Huo Wujiu had made very thorough arrangements before departing, as it turned out.

Lou Yue continued his aggressive rampage in court, just like before, all the while secretly coordinating with their plan. He pretended to be gradually sidelined by Pang Shao while also maintaining an unyielding front, as though he were growing more vulnerable beneath his tough exterior. At times, he even feigned fury over his supposed helplessness.

With Lou Yue diverting Pang Shao's attention, it became much easier for Jiang Suizhou to carry out his own tasks. He had his men closely monitor every move Pang Shao made, constantly watching for anything unusual.

As expected, Pang Shao kept himself extremely busy. Apart from dealing with Lou Yue, numerous matters from outside the capital also demanded his attention. He sent and received so many messages each day that it left him no time to focus on Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou knew that it must have been related to Lingnan.

By reviewing Pang Shao's numerous correspondences, he was able to uncover a few things.

First, Lingnan's locust problem continued to steadily worsen, though news of it was still being suppressed. Pang Wei had already arrived in Lingnan, and he was simply waiting for the right moment to stir up the people so they could use the unrest as a pretext to raise the troops.

Secondly, it was clear that Fang Zhaohe had no grasp of the bigger picture.

Just from a few sporadic messages, Jiang Suizhou could tell that Pang Shao had no intention of letting Fang Zhaohe live. His mismanagement and cover-up of the locust plague, combined with his previous embezzlement charges, would be more than enough to put his head on the chopping block. Pang Shao couldn't have asked for a better scapegoat.

If things went according to Pang Shao's plan, Lingnan would soon revolt, putting Lin'an in danger. Once the current emperor was dead, Pang Shao would then stage a "suppression" of the armed rebellion—at which point Fang Zhaohe would be made to take the fall.

But right now, he was completely absorbed in doing Pang Shao's dirty work for him.

Jiang Suizhou kept a close watch on all of Pang Shao's actions. It had been no more than seven or eight days since Huo Wujiu left, but Lou Wanjun had already secretly visited him several times. She never came for anything important, only to engage in friendly chatter.

After the first few visits, Jiang Suizhou finally voiced his confusion.

It was evening. Under the lamplight, he sorted through various pieces of information while Lou Wanjun sat nearby. She actually seemed a bit bored, idly sipping tea and nibbling on snacks.

“Who asked you to come here so frequently?” Jiang Suizhou asked.

Lou Wanjun paused, then smiled brightly.

“It was my own decision. There’s nothing to do at home, really. It’s much more interesting here.”

Jiang Suizhou couldn’t help but laugh.

“Right. My place is just that fascinating, hm?” he asked. “Come on, just tell me. Was it Huo Wujiu?”

Lou Wanjun fell silent. After thinking it over for a while, she relented.

“How did you know?”

“Just a hunch,” Jiang Suizhou said, smiling. “I didn’t expect to be right, though. Why did he want you to come here?”

Lou Wanjun leaned back in her chair.

“Because he was worried about you, obviously,” she said. “I don’t really know what there is to worry about in this oh-so-peaceful world of ours…but he threatened my dad, and my dad didn’t dare refuse. So, as someone with nothing better to do, it became my job to regularly check in on you and make sure you’re well protected from any danger.”

Jiang Suizhou thought this approach was remarkably foolish.

“Good grief…” He let out a helpless, exasperated laugh.

“Ah, then you’ve picked up on it as well?” she asked, a glimmer in her eye.

“What?” Jiang Suizhou asked, baffled.

“About Huo Wujiu, of course!”

Jiang Suizhou looked bemused. “What about him?”

“Oh, uh…” Lou Wanjun stared at him blankly, then murmured, “But…you’re a cut-sleeve, aren’t you? How is it that you still haven’t noticed?”

Jiang Suizhou's heart skipped a beat. "Noticed what?"

He watched Lou Wanjun, a faint but unmistakable trace of incredulous hope in his eyes.

Lou Wanjun spotted it instantly.

"Nothing," she said with a mischievous chuckle. "Just wait until he's back. He should probably tell you himself."

***

Meanwhile, a host of shadowy figures appeared on the surface of the Yangtze River.

Moving slowly from the northern bank to the southern, the boats glided across the vast waters like enormous beasts creeping through the night. No lights were visible on board; only up close could one make out their dark, looming shapes.

One after another, the boats reached the southern shore.

The soldiers began to disembark in silence, clad in dark armor that occasionally glinted with cold light in the night. Gradually, tens upon thousands of soldiers assembled in formation along the riverbank.

And yet, despite their overwhelming numbers, their arrival went completely unnoticed.

The commanding officer naturally knew what was going on.

Li Sheng sat astride his warhorse, quietly staring toward the south.

Wei Kai had sent him a message some time ago, informing him that Lou Yue had already bribed the general responsible for defending the southern bank to vacate his post for the night. Right now, Li Sheng's soldiers were the only ones standing on this riverbank.

Well, his soldiers—and the man he'd been ordered to kill.

The countless men behind Li Sheng were nothing more than bait, meant to lure his target into a trap. Of course, they knew nothing. They all believed they were here to help General Huo exact his revenge.

Only Li Sheng and his several dozen elite soldiers, already lying in wait nearby, knew that they were actually here to assassinate General Huo and to help His Highness the Crown Prince eliminate future threats once and for all.

He waited quietly.

Eventually, the moment finally came. A voice rang out from the distant forest ahead.

“Li Sheng?”

It was Huo Wujiu.

Soft, muffled noises filled the air as the dense formation of soldiers behind Li Sheng stirred with excitement. Li Sheng glanced back coolly and saw that his elite troops were all poised and ready, waiting for the signal to move.

He sneered.

No matter how much prestige Huo Wujiu commanded, Li Sheng would easily trample him into the dirt tonight. The soldiers behind him could do nothing about it except bite back their fury. After all, the crown prince himself was backing this mission.

“This is Li Sheng, General!” he called back.

At the same time, he gave a slight wave of his hand, signaling his elite soldiers to ready themselves.

Shortly after he responded, a faint rustling noise came from the forest.

A tall, slender figure burst out of the woods on horseback, charging straight for Li Sheng.

Li Sheng raised his hand.

In the next instant, dozens of arrows streaked through the air like falcons slicing through the sky, shattering the quiet of the night as they hurtled toward the blurry silhouette.

The man on the warhorse had no time to dodge. Numerous arrows pierced both him and his steed. With a long, agonized whinny, both horse and rider crashed to the ground.

Li Sheng’s eyes lit up.

Success.

The ordinary soldiers stood dumbfounded, frozen in place. Li Sheng’s elite troops, on the other hand, stepped forward and formed a tight shield around him.

Li Sheng held up a scroll.

“I have received an imperial decree from His Majesty, ordering me to slay this traitor!” he declared. “The traitorous General Huo Wujiu has long since defected to Southern Jing! If he lives, he will undoubtedly become a grave threat to our Great Liang.”

The scroll shimmered with a faint golden light in the darkness.

Thunderstruck, the ordinary soldiers had no idea how things had taken such a sudden turn. But there was indeed an imperial decree in Li Sheng’s hands. Even if they doubted its veracity, they were hesitant to believe he would go so far as to use a forged edict to brazenly kill Huo Wujiu.

For a brief moment, none of the soldiers breathed. The only flash of movement in that barren stretch of wilderness came as the man and his horse suddenly toppled the rest of the way to the ground.

Seeing that he’d fallen, Li Sheng put the scroll away with satisfaction. Surrounded by his elite troops, he rode toward the body.

His mission would be complete once he confirmed Huo Wujiu’s death.

From tonight onward, His Highness the Crown Prince would no longer need to be so deeply troubled by the fact that Huo Wujiu was still alive. Nor would he have to remain at the mercy of Pang Shao’s threats any longer, simply because Huo Wujiu was in his hands.

All of it was going to end here.

He was overcome by the joy of completing such a monumental task, and a smile spread involuntarily across his face. As he approached, a nearby soldier lifted his torch so they could see Huo Wujiu’s body.

The flames illuminated the corpse.

But all that lay on the ground was a dead horse and a scattering of straw.

It had only been a straw-stuffed figure on the horse’s back.

A moment later, a sharp arrow sliced through the air. It struck Li Sheng’s throat with deadly precision and force, piercing completely through the bones at the back of his neck.

As blood sprayed through the air, his eyes widened in horror, and the smile froze on his lips. There wasn’t even time for his expression to fade before he hit the ground.

In the sudden burst of silvery light, the last thing Li Sheng saw was Huo Wujiu sitting astride a horse at the edge of the forest, his expression icy cold.

The bow in his hand remained drawn, still held in the position in which he’d released the arrow.

Chapter 88

SWIFTLY, HUO WUJIU STOWED his bow and drew the horsewhip at his waist. He lashed the air with a sharp crack, summoning a low rumble from the surrounding shadows.

The thundering hoofbeats grew louder as Huo Wujiu's men surged in from the darkness on horseback, encircling Li Sheng's hundreds of elite troops. Directionless, the enemy scattered in panic. Some dared to raise their weapons in resistance but soon found themselves ruthlessly cut down. The clash was violent yet brief, the remaining men swiftly subdued by Huo Wujiu's soldiers.

In the aftermath, Huo Wujiu rode toward the great Yangtze River. The sky was hazy and choked with clouds. Without moonlight, the night seemed almost too dark.

A few months earlier, he had led his troops across this same river under similar darkness, only to find that the hundreds of thousands of soldiers meant to follow him had never moved. He had been left with only a handful of men, and the defending forces of Southern Jing had easily surrounded and crushed them.

That was the first defeat of his life.

For a while, he figured it must have been his own fault—maybe his strategy had been too reckless, or there were flaws in his deployment. He'd always been confident to a fault, and so he'd thought and thought, trying to shoulder all the blame himself, refusing to consider one glaring possibility.

The possibility that his own family had stabbed him in the back.

As he approached Li Sheng's corpse, he slowed to a halt. He gazed down at it in the dim light.

The man had died quite gruesomely. Even in death, his eyes remained wide open, and his blood soaked the earth around him in a radius of several feet.

Yet Huo Wujiu looked at him as dispassionately as if he were a hunted animal.

“General…” Wei Kai spoke up hesitantly behind him.

Huo Wujiu withdrew his gaze, his expression unchanged.

“Take a head count,” he said. “See how many men Li Sheng brought as bait.”

Wei Kai pressed his lips together. He knew his general was suffering, and seeing him feign indifference only made his heart ache more.

“Yes,” he replied softly.

He turned his horse and had only taken two steps when Huo Wujiu added, “Kill anyone who resists.”

Wei Kai sniffed quietly. “Understood.”

As soon as he left, Ji Hongcheng’s soldiers dragged forward the remaining captives. Most were dead, but the few survivors would need to be questioned.

Huo Wujiu sat tall on his horse, looking down at the prisoners as they were forced to their knees.

“Who gave Li Sheng his orders?” he asked calmly.

With great struggle, one of the men lifted his head to gaze at his interrogator.

Atop the towering warhorse sat an equally large and intimidating figure with a quiver of arrows at his waist and a bow on his back. He idly flicked the horsewhip in his hand. Though it never touched him, each faint whistle the whip produced sent chills down the captive man’s spine.

This was the first time he had seen Huo Wujiu up close.

Ever since his enlistment, he had served under the crown prince, General Huo Yuyan. Compared to Huo Wujiu’s endless and seemingly unstoppable victories, the crown prince was cautious and deliberate, the type to weigh every option carefully before making his move.

From the day Huo Wujiu took full command of his father’s army, Huo Yuyan and his men had lived in his shadow.

The world celebrated Huo Wujiu's never-ending series of triumphs, hailing him as an undefeated god of war—but what of Huo Yuyan? Who saw the crown prince's endless toil and sleepless nights of planning?

For a while, this was tolerable. In the midst of a bloody war for survival, they needed those victories. But now, with Great Liang established and its current emperor occupying the throne, allowing a mere general to overshadow the crown prince would only invite disaster.

Only the crown prince's most trusted men knew the truth about their mission that night, and they would never betray him.

The man clenched his teeth and said nothing.

"Did Huo Yuyan order this?" Huo Wujiu asked steadily.

In response, another captured soldier beside him immediately cried out, "No! The crown prince knew nothing! General Li acted alone, out of jealousy! That's why he wanted you dead!"

Huo Wujiu laughed coldly.

"He wanted me dead? Out of jealousy, you say?" He sounded amused. "As if he had the qualifications to dare!"

With that, he tugged the reins one-handed, and his horse obediently trotted forward.

"Without Huo Yuyan's decree, would he have dared forge an imperial edict? Would he have led troops across the river to kill me? Don't waste my time with lies. I already know the truth. Tonight, I just wanted to hear you admit it before you die."

His horse paced slowly before them.

One of the men, provoked by his disdain, flushed red with anger.

"If you already knew, General Huo, why cling to your life so?" he blurted out, unable to restrain himself. "If you truly cared for Great Liang's future—if you truly saw the crown prince as your brother—then you would have ended yourself long ago and spared him the decree and anxiety! Have you really become so arrogant that you think the empire can't survive without you? Ha! As long as you're alive, neither the emperor nor the crown prince can sleep peacefully!"

The horse stopped pacing. Huo Wujiu gazed down at him.

Unbeknownst to the man kneeling before him, Huo Wujiu's earlier confidence had only been a bluff. Yet the ruse was so effective it had drawn out not only the truth but also these…most incredible words.

Even Ji Hongcheng couldn't bear to listen.

Every general knew the fate of the hunting bow once the birds were gone. But without Huo Wujiu, how could they have reduced the prosperous, mighty Jing dynasty to its current wretched state? A decade ago, the state of Jing had only suffered from a foolish emperor—until fairly recently, they'd still rested securely on the foundations left by the previous ruler.

And still, Huo Wujiu's own uncle feared him enough to order his death? Even his cousin, who'd become his sworn brother and who he thought he could trust implicitly, wished to eliminate him?

"General Huo…" Ji Hongcheng stepped forward nervously when Huo Wujiu remained silent.

But Huo Wujiu raised his whip, signaling him to stop.

Ji Hongcheng fell quiet.

Shrouded by darkness, Huo Wujiu slowly smiled.

It was a bitter, mocking smile.

"Well said," he replied to the elite guard.

Then his expression hardened. With a tug of the reins and a kick, he spurred his horse toward the distant river.

"Execute all prisoners."

***

That night, the great river churned with furious waves.

After tallying the ten thousand troops gathered at the shore, Huo Wujiu cracked his whip flippantly as he ordered Wei Kai to immediately take Li Sheng's head and lead a force across the river. Under his command,

every soldier stationed on the northern bank was to be ferried to the south before dawn.

The military vessels shuttled back and forth all night without pause.

Meanwhile, an unremarkable gray pigeon flew across the river, reaching Lin’an shortly after midnight.

As dawn tinged the sky, two swift horses pulled a plain carriage through the fading night. Their hooves clattered over dew-slicked, empty streets before halting at Tianshu Gate, where their passenger delivered an urgent missive through the locked palace doors.

Moments later, a side gate opened. The messenger hurried inside, and with a heavy thud, the gate sealed shut—turning the opulent imperial palace into an impenetrable fortress once more.

Only the carriage remained, silent outside Tianshu Gate.

***

Palace gates were locked at set hours. For officials wishing to seek an audience at night, only the most urgent of memorials—delivered through Tianshu Gate, nearest the emperor’s quarters—could rouse the sovereign after dark.

This was the first time the emperor had experienced such a summons since his coronation. He had stayed up late with two new concubines and had just fallen asleep, only to be immediately woken back up. Now he sat slumped on the throne, his robe draped hastily over his shoulders, looking drowsy enough to pass out again at any second.

Soon, Pang Shao strode in and dropped to his knees before the throne.

“This subject once concealed a grave matter from Your Majesty. Now that it has come to light, the fault is mine!”

The emperor stifled a yawn, his face uncomprehending. “What matter?”

“Huo Wujiu has escaped.” Pang Shao gritted his teeth. “I have long been in contact with the crown prince of Northern Liang, Huo Yuyan. His men sent word tonight—Huo Wujiu has led Liang troops across the river, numbering possibly a hundred thousand.”

The emperor frowned deeply.

He understood each word separately, but together, they made no sense.

What was going on? How could so much happen in one night?

Pang Shao produced the letters he’d prepared in advance: his correspondence with Huo Yuyan. Placing them on the imperial desk, he hastily began to explain.

“Months ago, before Huo Wujiu crossed the river, Huo Yuyan contacted me. He wanted Huo Wujiu dead but lacked the nerve to do it himself. He sought to lure him here for me to kill, and I intended to do so… but I changed my mind. Because you see, if we kept him alive, we could use him as leverage against Huo Yuyan. After all, I could threaten to send Huo Wujiu back unharmed at any moment, once again endangering Huo Yuyan’s position on the throne; thus, as long as Huo Wujiu was in our Great Jing, Huo Yuyan couldn’t move recklessly.”

The emperor still looked half asleep. “Is this what you meant when you said keeping Huo Wujiu alive was useful?”

Pang Shao suppressed his disgust at the man’s sluggish incompetence.

If not for the emergency—and the need for imperial decrees to mobilize nearby garrisons—he wouldn’t have bothered explaining anything to this useless emperor. Additionally, his story mixed truth with lies rather liberally. For example, he tactfully omitted just how many hundreds of thousands in taels of silver he had extorted from Huo Yuyan using Huo Wujiu as leverage.

“Yes,” Pang Shao said tightly. “But now that Huo Wujiu has escaped, Lin’an is in danger. I implore Your Majesty to issue decrees at once, summoning troops from neighboring counties to protect the capital and ensure your own safety.”

That jolted the emperor mostly awake.

“Go, then! Go at once! But…how did Huo Wujiu escape?”

Pang Shao’s jaw clenched.

“The Prince of Jing freed him. Even the fastest courier would take three to five days to reach the river from Lin’an, yet the Prince of Jing’s residence has been perfectly calm all this time leading up to these events. He’s clearly covering for him.”

He knelt again before continuing.

“Your Majesty, you must arrest the Prince of Jing. If he aided Huo Wujiu’s escape, he may hold valuable intelligence—or even serve as leverage against Huo Wujiu himself.”

At the mention of the Prince of Jing, the emperor threw all else aside.

“That bastard spawn of a whore!” he spat. “That sickly wretch! He dares to collude with the enemy right under my nose?!”

He waved a hand.

“Guards! Go to the Prince of Jing’s residence and drag that vile creature here at once!”

“Your Majesty, no!” Pang Shao intervened.

The emperor scowled. “Why not?”

“The Prince of Jing is cunning. We cannot risk alerting him by moving too rashly,” Pang Shao explained. “But your humble subject has a plan.”

“Speak.”

“Today is the Grand Assembly. Just wait for him to enter the palace, then detain him easily and discreetly. Once he’s within these walls, he’ll be a sitting duck.”

The emperor thought this quite reasonable.

“Then…let’s do as you suggest,” he said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Yes,” Pang Shao replied curtly.

By now, the emperor’s drowsiness had vanished. As Pang Shao bowed and retreated, the first light of dawn blended with the candlelight in the hall.

Suddenly, the emperor spoke.

“Uncle.”

Pang Shao paused.

“No matter what…you’ll stay in the capital to protect me, won’t you?”

Pang Shao bowed even deeper, his face hidden beneath his sleeves and tall cap.

“Of course. Your subject will never abandon Your Majesty.”

Chapter 89

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Jiang Suizhou boarded his carriage and headed straight to the palace for the Grand Assembly.

He had slept poorly the night before, only managing to drift off in the late evening. By dawn, he was already up again.

But he knew he had no choice but to attend.

If he claimed illness and stayed home, the palace would inevitably send imperial physicians to examine him. However, he couldn't risk letting outsiders enter the estate right now—Huo Wujiu's presence there was no secret, and if anyone noticed anything amiss, the ruse would collapse. Thus, he gritted his teeth and stepped into the carriage.

The ride was bumpy and unpleasant. All that jostling left him feeling dizzy, and when he disembarked at Kaiyang Gate, the brilliant morning sun only worsened his condition.

Frowning, he gathered his robes and strode into the palace, lightheaded.

By his estimates, Huo Wujiu should have reached the southern bank of the Yangtze by now. However, that was only a guess, because he had received no word about how things were proceeding. He was completely clueless about whether the plan had succeeded or not.

He crossed the vast white-marble plaza inside Kaiyang Gate and entered Guangyuan Hall.

Though he arrived early, Pang Shao—who usually came late—was already waiting inside. Several officials clustered around him, but he seemed distracted, as if preoccupied with other matters.

Jiang Suizhou lowered his gaze.

Pang Shao's odd behavior had to indicate something. Had he made a move? Or perhaps he planned to enact something soon? If the court session yielded no clues, Jiang Suizhou would need Xu Du to investigate further.

Just as he pondered this, Pang Shao’s gaze flicked toward him.

It was a fleeting glance, but the cold, clear malice in it sent a chill down Jiang Suizhou’s spine.

He averted his eyes again, a sense of foreboding creeping over him.

Had Pang Shao discovered Huo Wujiu’s escape? But there had been no signs of surveillance at his estate…

Jiang Suizhou stole another glance at Pang Shao before turning to scan the palace grounds outside.

Rows of imperial guards stood rigid at every gate, while officials trickled across the sunlit plaza toward Guangyuan Hall.

Now that he was inside the palace, leaving before the assembly was impossible. He’d have to return immediately after court to uncover what was happening.

Within half the time it took to drink tea, the hall had already filled with silent officials. Normally, the emperor would arrive at least a quarter-hour late, and yet today, the eunuch’s announcement rang out unexpectedly early.

The officials knelt respectfully as the emperor took his throne, and Jiang Suizhou’s unease deepened.

Deviation from routine always spelled trouble, and with both Pang Shao and the emperor acting strangely, something was definitely off here.

He forced himself to focus, though his thoughts kept straying to Huo Wujiu. If these two seemed calm rather than frantic, didn’t that mean Huo Wujiu’s plan had failed? He knew he shouldn’t doubt Huo Wujiu’s abilities, but anxiety clouded his judgment.

Choked with apprehension, he endured the session.

When the court finally adjourned, he exhaled in relief and joined the officials as they bowed their way out.

As he turned to leave with the crowd, the emperor’s voice halted him.

“Wait, Wudi.”

There was nothing odd about his expression, but Jiang Suizhou felt a vague sense of foreboding. After some thought, he decided to make use of

his complexion, pallid from a lack of sleep. After coughing pitifully a few times, he forced a smile to his face.

“Huangxiong,” he said in a hoarse, breathless voice, “your brother has caught a chill and fears infecting you. I must return to my residence and take my medicine.”

The emperor shifted, leaning back against the throne.

“The matter is urgent,” he said. “It’s a task only you can handle.”

Jiang Suizhou’s brow twitched. “What task is Huangxiong referring to?”

The emperor quietly sized him up, his expression unreadable.

“In a little over a month, it will be the anniversary of our imperial father’s death,” he said, his tone stiff and his face cold as he watched Jiang Suizhou. “I’d like to have the Ministry of Rites hold a memorial ceremony. Wudi, the two of us are his only remaining sons. Surely you won’t refuse this duty?”

Jiang Suizhou had just finished coughing, and though his face remained pale, his cheeks now bore an unnatural flush that made him look unwell.

His mind raced, leaping from thought to thought.

The deepest rift between the current emperor and the original prince stemmed from their father’s favoritism. Despite the emperor’s frosty attitude toward him, he’d insisted on keeping him here. Had Pang Shao persuaded him to do so?

No wonder Pang Shao’s demeanor earlier had been so odd.

That explained it.

But a sliver of doubt remained within Jiang Suizhou. He shot the emperor a hesitant glance, then turned to look outside the palace hall.

Officials weren’t allowed to remain in the palace after the assembly without an imperial order. All the ministers had already dispersed. And yet, in the distance, the guards and eunuchs were already closing the palace gates.

Instantly, alarm bells filled Jiang Suizhou’s head.

Why would you shut the palace gates in broad daylight?!

As if in answer, Jiang Shunheng's cold, mirthless laughter rang out behind him.

"Is that a 'no,' Wudi?" he asked. "Unfortunate, but I'm afraid you don't get to defy my imperial decree. Someone, go and offer the Prince of Jing another invitation on my behalf, won't you?"

Out of nowhere, about four tall, burly guards appeared behind Jiang Suizhou, blocking his retreat completely.

The old eunuch standing behind the emperor slowly walked down the dais steps, a fake smile plastered over his face. He bowed slightly in front of Jiang Suizhou.

"Shall we go, Your Highness Prince of Jing?"

The eunuch looked up at him, his smile enigmatic.

Jiang Suizhou's heart sank. All of the apprehension and nebulous unease he'd felt that morning abruptly solidified into reality.

Not only had he fallen into an inescapable trap, he was completely alone.

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Lou Yue left the palace and headed back to his estate as usual. When he reached the residence gates, he was surprised to see his daughter, Lou Wanjun, waiting anxiously for him.

"Father!" She rushed over to him.

"What is it?" he asked urgently.

She thrust a slip of paper into his hand.

"A message from Huo Wujiu, delivered by a fast messenger on horseback just now," she explained.

Lou Yue quickly unfolded the note.

Bold, sweeping strokes filled the paper. It was unmistakably Huo Wujiu's handwriting.

Mission accomplished. Will return in three days. Surround Lin'an—do not let Pang escape. Expect upheaval in the city.

Written with particular emphasis was the letter's last line: *Protect Jiang Suizhou at all costs.*

Lou Yue took a deep breath.

"It's done," he murmured.

As he began to hurry toward the residence, Lou Wanjun suddenly grabbed his arm and stopped him in his tracks.

"Where's the Prince of Jing?" she asked. "Now that we've received word from Huo Wujiu, shouldn't you go and fetch him quickly? You could bring him directly to the military camp. I think that'd be safest."

Lou Yue nodded. "You're right. I need to deploy troops outside the city first. Send someone immediately to the Prince of Jing's residence to escort him."

Lou Wanjun nodded and turned to fetch a horse from the gatehouse.

Suddenly, a faint rustling came from the eaves above the entrance. Lou Wanjun looked up. A shadowy figure darted skyward from a nearby alley, leaping nimbly before landing right in front of her.

"Who are you?!" she exclaimed in shock.

But the figure didn't stop. Instead, they rushed past her and seized Lou Yue before he could leave.

When Lou Yue turned to look at him, he immediately recognized the man as one of Huo Wujiu's subordinates left in the capital.

"General Lou, there's trouble in the palace," the man said.

Lou Yue's brow furrowed. "What?"

"They've sealed the palace gates," the man said hurriedly, "and His Highness the Prince of Jing hasn't come out."

Lou Yue blanched and immediately turned to rush toward the city gates—only to be caught by Lou Wanjun once more.

“Father, where are you going?” she demanded, still gripping his arm.

“Where do you think?” he barked. “There are still troops outside the palace! If we enter the city now, we might still be able to rescue him!”

Then, after a fraction of a second, he faltered.

“I shouldn’t have left so soon,” he berated himself quietly. “I should’ve waited for the Prince of Jing…”

Lou Wanjun’s brows knitted together in frustration.

“Which will happen quicker—you leading troops into the city and swooping in to save him or the emperor ordering his execution?” she pressed.

Lou Yue froze.

“So what do you suggest we do?” he asked, at a loss.

Lou Wanjun turned to the messenger. “Did Pang Shao leave the palace earlier?”

“Yes, he left long ago.”

Lou Wanjun clenched her jaw.

“Father,” she said. “At this point, the only option is an exchange.”

With that, she yanked a horse from the gatehouse and swung herself onto its back.

“You go outside the city and seal off Lin’an immediately. I’ll head to Pang Shao’s residence to see if I can capture him alive,” she said. “Even if we can’t arrange a prisoner swap, having hostages on both sides will make the emperor think twice before killing anyone.”

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News came into the palace in rapid succession.

After the Grand Assembly, Pang Shao’s men hastily left for the city gates, carrying the imperial decree. There, before they could exit the city, they were unexpectedly intercepted by Lou Yue’s troops.

Before long, the entire forty-thousand-strong army succeeded in blockading all eight gates of Lin’an, effectively trapping the city’s officials and civilians inside. Not even a bird could fly in or out.

The unthinkable had finally happened. Lou Yue had rebelled.

Though the emperor was beyond furious that this reckless brute had managed to revolt, he lacked the ability to devise a solution. Trembling with rage, he sent his men to summon the Grand Chancellor for urgent counsel.

But when they arrived at his residence, Pang Shao himself was nowhere to be found.

The estate was empty except for a handful of servants, neglected concubines, and common-born children who remained behind. It appeared that Pang Shao, along with his youngest son and closest aides, had already fled the city amid the chaos of the lockdown.

For a while, the emperor paced anxiously in the golden hall, waiting for Pang Shao to come back and rescue him.

Gradually, a realization began to form in his mind.

The thought finally solidified as he sat on the throne, listening to a hurried report from the returning imperial guards.

The emperor was silent for a long moment. Finally, he spoke in a hoarse voice.

“My uncle must have gone to rally reinforcements for me,” he said. “Of course. What use are the people inside the city now? Only troops from outside can break a siege.”

No one dared offer any response to this.

Eventually, the eunuch at his side cautiously ventured, “Your Majesty…”

The emperor took a deep breath.

“The thing is, my old friend,” he said, “my uncle promised me. He told me that he would stay in the city to protect me, no matter what. Why would he break his word?”

The eunuch had no answer.

“I’ll wait,” the emperor declared with a laugh. “My uncle won’t abandon me. Besides, that old traitor has done nothing more than seal the gates. I refuse to believe Lou Yue has the guts to storm the imperial palace, let alone raise a hand against me. I’ll wait for my uncle to return. I know he’ll save me.”

With that, he stood and walked away without another word.

But after only a few steps, he staggered and nearly fell. He barely managed to steady himself against a golden dragon-carved pillar.

The palace maids and eunuchs rushed to support him.

“Your Majesty, don’t worry!” said the old eunuch to soothe him. “Lou Yue must be targeting the Grand Chancellor with his actions. He wouldn’t dare harm you—”

“Silence.” The emperor cut him off.

The eunuch immediately fell quiet.

The emperor lowered his gaze.

Why was this happening? He’d thought that things would go smoothly once his biased father and that witch of a concubine died. After he ascended the throne with his uncle’s unwavering support, he believed he would never again feel the loneliness and abandonment that plagued him as a child.

He never imagined that one day, his own uncle would forsake him as well.

“Your Majesty…” the old eunuch called out tremulously.

The emperor took a deep breath.

“Has Jiang Suizhou been thrown into the dungeon yet?” he asked.

“Yes,” the eunuch answered swiftly.

The emperor chuckled.

“Then let’s go,” he said. “I have matters to discuss with that brother of mine.”

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The moment Jiang Suizhou left the grand hall, he was tightly bound. Quite frankly, the restraints were unnecessary—his frail body could hardly withstand an escape attempt, with or without such measures.

He had already anticipated this possibility, and as grim as his prospects seemed, he felt a flicker of relief.

If the emperor had gone to such lengths to detain him, it meant Huo Wujiu had succeeded in his plans and escaped their grasp. Why else would they bother with Jiang Suizhou, except as a last resort?

At the very least, Huo Wujiu was safe.

Jiang Suizhou's captors dragged him through a secluded part of the palace, into a solemn yet unassuming courtyard, and finally down into an underground prison.

Reeking of damp decay and old blood, the dungeon seemed completely devoid of life.

As he stepped inside, he realized the stench was oddly familiar—reminiscent of the day he first met Huo Wujiu.

Inwardly, he had to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all.

Really? The high-security prison? The emperor truly overestimates me.

Once the guards shoved him into a cell and locked the door, they left without a word. Pain shot through Jiang Suizhou's body as he collapsed onto the damp straw. Gasping, he took in his surroundings.

Dark blood splatters stained the walls and floors, and the air carried the heady scent of moisture and rot.

This gloomy place was Lin'an's most infamous dungeon. Jiang Suizhou had long heard that no one survived more than three days here. That was until Huo Wujiu became the first exception in years.

Jiang Suizhou looked down at the bloody straw and sighed. Considering how little it took to exhaust this useless body, his chances of becoming the second exception were approximately nil.

Strangely enough, this realization only calmed his anxious heart and lifted the burden of fear from his shoulders.

He'd always thought he would be afraid of death, but now that he found himself face-to-face with the prospect, he felt more relieved than terrified. Sure, he had one foot in the grave, but at least his worst fears had not come to pass.

Huo Wujiu was safe. That was enough.

After all, the sickly Prince of Jing would only be remembered in passing mentions, while Huo Wujiu was destined to become a treasure cherished by historians.

And more importantly, he'd rather be locked up here than allow Huo Wujiu to suffer even a tiny mote more than he already had.

He sighed again.

It was just…a bit of a pity, really, that certain things worked out the way they did.

How unfortunate that his unspoken feelings would die with him, known to no one but himself.

He closed his eyes.

An indeterminate amount of time later, Jiang Suizhou woke to the sound of hurried footsteps echoing outside. He opened his eyes to see the guards unlock the door and allow two eunuchs to scurry in and place a chair in the cell. As they retreated, Jiang Suizhou caught a glimpse of black robes embroidered with golden dragons stretched across the large man in the hallway behind them.

It was, of course, the emperor.

Jiang Shunheng, in all his rotund glory, strode into the cell and sat down in the chair, utterly expressionless. A crowd of eunuchs and guards followed, and soon the cramped cell was overflowing with people.

And yet…Pang Shao didn't seem to be among them.

Meanwhile, the emperor had already fixed Jiang Suizhou with a frigid glare. Jiang Suizhou locked eyes with him.

The emperor leaned back in his chair.

“Men,” he drawled, “string him up first.”

With that order, Jiang Suizhou understood what was going on.

The emperor wasn’t here to interrogate him.

He was here to vent his rage.

Chapter 90

ONE OF THE GUARDS abruptly yanked Jiang Suizhou to his feet while another pulled ropes from the cell rafters. They were brutally rough with him.

The sharp pain jolted Jiang Suizhou's fading consciousness back to clarity.

Hold on. Where was Pang Shao?

If the emperor was here alone, there were only two possibilities—either Pang Shao had learned of Huo Wujiu's plans and had gone to capture him, or the rebellion was about to succeed and Pang Shao had fled in anticipation.

Grunting and struggling against the ropes, Jiang Suizhou lifted his head to watch the emperor. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the guards already bringing out torture instruments.

He clenched his teeth, forcing himself to stay composed, then let out a cold laugh.

"Oh, Huangxiong, I see you truly do think highly of your poor, frail brother."

The emperor stared intently at Jiang Suizhou, his eyes filled with undisguised hatred. The loathing twisted his features, causing his fleshy jowls to quiver.

"Jiang Suizhou," he spat. "You think you've won?"

His jaw clenched, and his voice dripped with venom. It was the look of a cornered man, utterly consumed by hate.

Judging by the emperor's appearance and behavior, it seemed safe to assume that there was little chance of victory for the emperor or the Pang faction—and the emperor knew it.

Jiang Suizhou closed his eyes and exhaled silently in relief.

Good. Then he had no more worries.

At this point, his fate was sealed. He knew better than to hang his hopes on a miracle escape…but at the same time, his opponent was in dire straits with Pang Shao gone. If both sides were at a stalemate, then there was no harm in taking a gamble.

Maybe it was hopeless, or maybe the emperor still clung to some shred of familial love and hope for his uncle.

Keeping his voice steady, Jiang Suizhou made his bet.

"What is Huangxiong saying?" he remarked mildly.

"What am *I* saying?" the emperor repeated incredulously. An odd laugh squeezed its way out of his throat, and he rose from his chair. "Don't play dumb now. I know of your scheme to free Huo Wujiu. You've been waiting for this day, haven't you?"

Jiang Suizhou chuckled softly.

"Not at all," he said. "There was no scheming involved. Huo Wujiu merely offered me something in exchange for my assistance, citing the potential for…mutual benefits."

"Mutual benefits?" the emperor sneered as if he'd heard a joke. Then he gritted his teeth and added with vindictive relish, "If the benefits were mutual, then why did he abandon you to die at my hands?"

He emphasized the word "abandon" with a peculiar intensity, as if harboring some unspoken bitterness and resentment.

Unshaken, Jiang Suizhou just gave a little laugh.

"He did no such thing," he said. "I hold leverage over him. What's more, that leverage just so happens to be something Pang Shao desperately wants. Pang Shao won't let me die."

Jiang Suizhou glanced around the cell, feigning confusion. "By the way, where is Pang Shao?"

The emperor frowned at Jiang Suizhou, a little confused. "He's gone. Why?"

With the expertise of a veteran actor, Jiang Suizhou arranged his face into the very picture of astonishment.

“Impossible!” he exclaimed. “Pang Shao would never give up before obtaining it! How could he have left already?”

The emperor’s frown intensified, but deep down inside, a weight lifted from his chest.

So…his uncle really had gone to fetch reinforcements for him, then. He hadn’t abandoned him, after all.

That meant Pang Shao would return soon, even if it wasn’t for his sake. He had to come back for whatever object Jiang Suizhou held…right?

“What exactly is this thing?” the emperor inquired after a brief pause.

Jiang Suizhou pressed his lips shut.

The emperor’s patience—both for his brother and his uncle—was wearing thin.

Pang Shao always kept him in the dark until the last moment, all the while insisting everything was under control. While he enjoyed having so little responsibility, it bothered him at times too. It felt as if he were being excluded and pushed further and further away, almost like a pretender to his own throne.

But even if his uncle treated him this way, the Prince of Jing was in no position to do the same. What right did that sickly wretch have to keep anything from him?!

Displeasure colored his features. The emperor could tolerate it no longer. He stepped forward and kicked Jiang Suizhou savagely in the ribs.

Though years of indulgence had drained the emperor’s body of strength, his hulking mass still carried weight. Upon taking that full-force kick, Jiang Suizhou let out a muffled groan, and his suspended body swung wildly.

“I asked you a question,” the emperor said.

Jiang Suizhou met his gaze with defiance.

“If you have the nerve, Huangxiong, you can kill me today,” he said. “Then when Pang Shao returns with his army, you can explain to him why that coveted little item is rotting in the stomach of my corpse.”

The emperor stared at him, unblinking.

Jiang Suizhou's very existence was loathsome to him. It always had been. He was a living reminder of Jiang Shunheng's past grievances, inspiring rage whenever he laid eyes upon him. But somehow, Jiang Suizhou always remained submissive. He managed to avoid the line of fire and endured humiliation without protest.

This was his first daring act of insolence.

It made the emperor yearn even more desperately for his suffering. He wanted to watch Jiang Suizhou break entirely, to submit his frail body to every type of torture in this chamber, to personally slice away his flesh piece by piece.

But he couldn't.

Furious but lost, he stared at Jiang Suizhou.

Within mere minutes of being strung up within this frigid cell, Jiang Suizhou's face and lips were deathly pale. He truly looked like he could die at any moment already.

And…even if all this feeble cur had was his worthless life, the emperor dared not gamble with it.

No matter how deep their grudges, he couldn't let his uncle return in disappointment to a corpse.

Because, despite how things might seem, his uncle hadn't abandoned him, after all. He knew that now. And besides, his mother—Pang Shao's beloved younger sister—was still in the palace, and apparently Jiang Suizhou held something his uncle wanted. Pang Shao wouldn't forsake him, not with these precious things at stake.

Unconsciously, the emperor listed out each of these reasons to himself, like a neglected boy displaying all his most valuable toys in the hope that someone would look at him a moment more.

His hands trembled, his eyes bloodshot.

Finally, his fury erupted. He couldn't kill Jiang Suizhou, but he certainly could make him suffer.

He snatched a salt-soaked whip from a guard and lashed it across Jiang Suizhou's body.

The moment the whip landed, it split open the thick imperial robes and carved a bloody welt into Jiang Suizhou’s skin, despite the emperor’s lack of strength.

Jiang Suizhou’s brow contorted, and his jaw clenched as he failed to bite back a pained groan.

The emperor stared intently at the blood seeping through the torn fabric. His features twisted in a darkly satisfied grin.

Gritting his teeth, he lashed Jiang Suizhou once more.

Soon, the metallic tang of fresh blood nearly overpowered the stench of stale rot in the air, and the gruesome sound of flaying flesh echoed throughout the dungeon.

So he couldn’t kill Jiang Suizhou yet. Fine. Let him beg for the release of death, then.

Let their imperial father in heaven see how his favoritism only condemned his worthless son to an even worse fate.

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Thanks to General Lou Yue’s unmatched military efficiency, Lin’an was completely sealed off within an hour.

During the chaos, his men intercepted Pang Shao’s carriage on its way out of the city. Though the Grand Chancellor’s well-trained elite guards inflicted heavy casualties, Lou Yue’s forces ultimately captured Pang Shao, his wife, and his youngest son. All three of them were now kept under heavy guard.

Lou Wanjun returned empty-handed from her trip to Pang Shao’s residence to find her father staring grimly down at Pang Shao himself, who lay tightly bound at his feet.

“Now we send word to the palace,” Lou Yue said.

Arms crossed, Lou Wanjun approached Pang Shao and gave him a sharp kick.

“What are we waiting for? Just cut off a finger and send it to the palace. The emperor will understand that message loud and clear.”

“And risk him mutilating the Prince of Jing in return?” he snapped, shooting her a critical glance.

Lou Wanjun frowned. “Well, what else are we supposed to do?”

Lou Yue surveyed the handful of prisoners within the military camp, then quickly shifted his gaze to Pang Shao’s wife and his wailing five-year-old son.

“Write a letter. Send it with the boy to the palace gates,” he instructed. “Say my actions are in response to Pang Shao seizing my troops in Lingnan, and I demand an explanation. Pang Shao, his son, and his wife are safe in my hands for now. I’ll release them if someone brings me the head of Lingnan’s rebel commander. But I also owe the Prince of Jing; if he dies, I’ll kill Pang Shao as well.”

Lou Wanjun quickly assented, but as she grabbed Pang Shao’s child and turned to leave, Lou Yue stopped her.

“One more thing,” he said. “Tell him Pang Shao already told me about Huo Wujiu. Assure him that I will deal with Huo Wujiu as long as my troops are returned to me.”

By dusk, they found a reply slipped through the city gates.

It was a letter penned by the emperor. His brushstrokes were scrawled and messy—clear evidence of his highly agitated state.

Rest assured, Jiang Suizhou lives. Send troops south immediately. I’ll bring you whichever heads you demand, but you must deliver the army without delay.

Lou Yue exhaled in relief.

The ruse had worked. With this, Jiang Suizhou was safe inside the palace for now.

But Lou Yue found himself on edge again the following day.

The new prefect of Suzhou was a member of Pang Shao’s faction, and with Suzhou so close to Lin’an, he quickly learned of the siege and sent word to Pang Wei in Lingnan before wasting no time in assembling

Suzhou’s thirty thousand troops. He had led them north to Lin’an to reinforce the emperor, and they had arrived that evening.

At this time, Lou Yue and his men were guarding the city gates. They couldn’t enter the city, and now enemy forces had arrived outside. With Lou Yue stretched thin at the moment, he and a few of his generals each took a position to defend against the reinforcements from Suzhou.

Fortunately, Lou Yue’s men were doggedly determined to hold the city gates, while the enemy was probing and cautious. Their commander was a civil official with little military experience, and he failed to get them within a stone’s throw of the gates. At one point, Lou Wanjun and her troops even chased one of their regiments back six miles.

Yet that very night, a scout delivered a message.

As soon as Pang Wei heard that Lin’an was surrounded and his father was captured, he spent the night assembling his own troops. All three hundred thousand soldiers under his command in Lingnan were currently on their way to the capital.

Lingnan wasn’t that far from Lin’an; the vanguard would arrive in three days at most.

Lou Yue gathered the generals under his command to run the numbers, but every calculation showed Pang Wei would arrive before Huo Wujiu. Their hearts sank. When the meeting ended, no one spoke. Each commanding officer returned to their post, resolved to hold out the best they could until reinforcements came.

The gloom lingered outside the city walls for a full day.

The second day arrived.

As the rising sun broke through the clouds and bathed the ancient city walls in gold, the commanding officer on guard duty kept a bleary eye on the horizon.

He’d been assigned management of the night watch for the northern gate, and he hadn’t slept all night. By dawn, his nerves were frayed and his vision began to blur. Just as he started to descend from the top of the wall to get some breakfast, a soldier on guard next to him suddenly cried out in surprise.

“Sir! They’re here!”

Startled, the officer squinted into the distance to see a great cloud of dust, kicked up by a large number of soldiers and horses.

A vast army was marching toward Lin’an.

They learned of Pang Wei’s departure only two days ago! How had they gotten to Lin’an so soon?

“Quick, alert General Lou!” he ordered. “They’ve arrived!”

The soldier gave a hurried grunt of acknowledgment in reply and started to run off to deliver the news. After a few steps, he paused and turned back.

“But sir, who is it?”

The officer almost kicked him in frustration.

“Who do you think? They couldn’t have come from the Yangtze so quickly!”

He looked back out toward the advancing army and froze.

Then again…looking out from this position at the top of the northern gate, they were indeed facing the Yangtze.

…And the man at the head of the vanguard really did look to be Huo Wujiu.

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The commanding officer stumbled down the wall and rushed outside the city gates. Several dozen yards out, he met Huo Wujiu galloping toward him on horseback.

Behind Huo Wujiu were at least ten thousand cavalrymen, and the troops following after were likely ten times that number.

How could this be?

The exhausted officer nearly wept with joy.

The Yangtze River was a great distance away, and the troops under Huo Wujiu's command were originally stationed north of it. They shouldn't have been able to arrive so quickly…and yet the man on the black warhorse at the forefront was unmistakably Huo Wujiu.

A moment later, Huo Wujiu raised a hand, halting the troops behind him. He spurred his horse forward to meet the commanding officer. With a single tug of the reins, the warhorse came to a stop, reared once, then stilled.

"General Huo!" the officer cried out in excitement.

He dropped to one knee and clasped his hands in salute.

Huo Wujiu gave a faint hum and tugged the reins, steering his horse toward the city gates.

"We never imagined you would arrive so swiftly—we were beside ourselves with worry!"

The officer hurried to follow.

"Mm," Huo Wujiu intoned, glancing back at him. "Where is the Prince of Jing?"

The commanding officer froze, unsure why General Huo was asking after the prince.

"His Highness is…in the palace?" he replied.

Huo Wujiu's grip tightened abruptly, and the warhorse let out a sharp whinny as it halted in place.

When he turned his head, something shifted abruptly in his gaze. Though his face was as expressionless as ever, his eyes held something terrifying and intense. Even the officer couldn't help but shudder.

"What did you say?" Those words were forced through Huo Wujiu's clenched teeth.

Chapter 91

THE COMMANDING OFFICER TREMBLED, horrified and confused.

General Lou hadn't said anything about this! Was this something to be kept from General Huo?!

"I-it happened a few days ago," the officer stammered in a panic. "The emperor detained His Highness in the palace, and since then, he hasn't —"

Before he could finish, Huo Wujiu's low, icy voice cut him off.

"How many days ago?"

The officer dared not say more.

Huo Wujiu fell silent.

After a moment, he clenched his jaw and looked down at the commanding officer. The sheer ferocity in his expression nearly made the man's knees buckle.

"This was Lou Yue's doing?" he asked.

He seemed composed, but his words came out in a low hiss from behind gritted teeth. There was a storm beneath the calm, barely restrained, and a mere glimpse of it was more terrifying than another man's outright fury could ever be.

"General Lou truly had no choice! The emperor and the others somehow got word, and they deliberately waited so they could capture the prince during the Grand Assembly—"

Huo Wujiu raised a hand, gripping his horsewhip, and motioned for the commanding officer to shut up.

The man immediately obeyed.

Huo Wujiu guided his horse to the side with one hand, turning his head slightly toward the troops behind him. The commanding officers understood at once and, with disciplined efficiency, divided their forces into formations outside the city.

Huo Wujiu turned back to the commanding officer at his side.

“Tell Lou Yue to start praying to the gods,” he growled, voice low and biting. “If anything happens to the Prince of Jing, he’ll bid his own life farewell.”

Then he turned and issued one more order.

“Open the city gates.”

***

Over the past two days, the emperor had done little else but indulge in unrestrained revelry.

His debauchery was not completely unprecedented, but it quickly took on an abnormal and dangerously frenzied quality that dissuaded his subordinates from speaking up. Meekly, they could only obey his orders. Each day, they reported on the situation outside the city walls and checked whether the Prince of Jing, locked away in the dungeon, was still breathing.

The emperor had beaten him mercilessly that day. And despite His Majesty’s unpracticed hand, when they finally cut the unconscious Prince of Jing down from the ropes, he was covered in wounds.

The emperor’s subordinates had been delivering medicine and food to the prince daily, on his orders, and thus the Prince of Jing just barely clung to life, though he kept drifting in and out of consciousness.

Then, one morning, a guard sent to scout the city gates rushed back to the palace in a panic.

“Your Majesty!” he cried urgently as he burst into the emperor’s chambers. “Disaster has struck! Huo Wujiu himself has led his troops to the city gates! Your Majesty, you must gather your things and flee the palace at once!”

Yet the emperor only asked, “Isn’t Lou Yue there?”

“Your Majesty, General Lou is most likely deceiving you!” the guard argued desperately, fidgeting with anxiety. “Scouts at the gates report that

Huo Wujiu's forces are stationed in formation outside the walls, but Lou Yue's troops haven't moved at all. They're clearly in league with him!"

The emperor, however, gently swished his cup a bit and merely watched the wine ripple inside it.

"So," he said calmly, "Lou Yue has betrayed me too?"

"There's no time for this now, Your Majesty! Nothing is more important than your life! So long as you survive, these traitors and rebels can be executed sooner or later!" the guard pleaded, trembling.

Suddenly, the palace servants lined up and knelt before the emperor in dense rows, silently begging him to flee. Even the two beauties nestled in his arms quivered in terror, their robes slipping loose as they too dropped to their knees in a panic.

They all knew what fate awaited them now. If the Northern Liang army truly breached the imperial palace, none of them would survive, regardless of whether the emperor lived or died.

Drunk and bleary-eyed, the emperor sat upright, gazing at the golden, resplendent hall filled with prostrate figures.

When they pressed themselves to the floor like this, all that was visible to him was the tops of their heads—an expansive, anonymous amalgam of dark hair. Though the palace was packed with people, the emperor felt alone.

In all of heaven and earth, he was completely and utterly alone.

Finally, he had to come to terms with it. Somehow, he'd truly convinced himself that his uncle had left the city only to summon reinforcements…but that didn't really make sense, did it? No one brought their wife and young child along to raise troops.

Then he'd thought maybe Lou Yue would be his last lifeline, but in the end, Lou Yue had deceived him as well.

Every single person he trusted had abandoned him.

Everyone.

From the moment his father cast him aside like worthless trash, his fate was sealed. He had always been unwanted; he should have realized that

he always would be.

The emperor raised his wine cup and began to laugh.

***

Jiang Suizhou had spent the past few days in a haze of pain and delirium.

Fortunately, the emperor put enough stock in his words that he dared not let him die. Each time he regained consciousness, he forced himself to eat just enough to hold onto the thread of life.

But the pain was unbearable.

He'd never been beaten before, let alone tortured to the brink of death. His body ached so much it was nearly numb; the searing pain was like fire coursing through every nerve in his body, burning them to ash.

How had Huo Wujiu endured an entire month of this agony?

As he wavered in and out of consciousness, Jiang Suizhou lost all sense of time—until this particular day, when he opened his eyes to find himself surrounded by blindingly bright light. The air was thick with a heavy, unfamiliar fragrance. Wherever he was now, it wasn't the dungeon.

Blinking groggily, he found his vision assaulted by a dazzling golden glow.

Where was he?

As he shifted slightly, he realized that his hands were bound behind his back. He was seated on a chair that felt quite soft beneath him, but the hard backrest jabbed its sharp edges into his wounds. Each movement sent waves of fresh pain through his fragile body.

"Awake?"

That was the emperor's voice.

Jiang Suizhou's eyes struggled to adjust to the light. Gradually, his surroundings resolved from a glowing blur into a resplendent, gilded hall.

He recognized this as the main hall of the emperor’s chambers, and… the seat beneath him seemed to be the imperial throne.

The emperor’s desk lay overturned in front of him, surrounded by memorials, books, and assorted documents scattered across the floor. Just a short distance away, at the foot of the dais, was the emperor himself. Jiang Shunheng sat sprawled on a thick carpet with his legs splayed and his imperial robe hanging loosely off one shoulder. A wine jug dangled from one hand.

Jiang Suizhou frowned at him, unsure what exactly he planned to do next.

The emperor grinned drunkenly. “Well? How does my throne feel?”

“What do you want?” Jiang Suizhou asked, his voice weak and hoarse.

“Nothing much.” The emperor chuckled. “I just don’t want to die, you know? There’s still so much I haven’t seen, so I can’t die yet.”

He tried to push himself up with one hand but stumbled over his own robes, crashing back to the ground.

He didn’t seem to care.

“Anyway,” he continued, “I’m going to watch you die first. And after that, Huo Wujiu too. He ruined my empire, so I want to see him die as well.”

He laughed again.

“Don’t believe me?” The emperor smirked. “Sure, I can’t kill him myself. But someone else will do it for me.”

“Who?” Jiang Suizhou rasped.

The emperor crossed his legs and took a leisurely swig of wine.

“His brother,” he answered cheerfully. “You know, you should thank him, actually. How else could you have gotten lucky enough to marry Huo Wujiu in the first place?”

Jiang Suizhou’s pain-fogged mind sharpened abruptly.

“…What did you say?” he pressed.

His urgency made him cough violently, the convulsions tearing at his wounds. White-hot pain flashed behind his eyes, nearly sending him back into unconsciousness.

The emperor was too drunk to notice his distress. He simply braced a hand on the floor and swayed to his feet.

He glanced at Jiang Suizhou.

The prince’s once-elegant court robes were now torn and stained with blood, old and new. His hair was disheveled, and his deathly pale face was streaked with crimson. He looked utterly ruined.

Yet he was still beautiful—even half dead, there was an eerie, delicate allure to him, like a bloodied orchid trampled into mud.

The emperor’s lips curled in satisfaction.

Clutching the wine jug, he clumsily gathered his robes with his free hand and staggered up the vermilion steps of the dais.

He crouched beside the overturned desk, rifling through the mess of scattered books until he pulled out a few sheets of paper.

“Never saw this coming, did you?” he taunted.

He ambled over to Jiang Suizhou and waved the papers in front of his nose.

“See this? It’s secret correspondence. The crown prince, Huo Wujiu’s own precious brother, sold him out to my uncle long ago.”

Laughing, he plopped back onto the floor, shaking the papers.

“Poor Huo Wujiu! So what if he’s Liang’s own god of war? What use is it? His father died because of him, and now even his brother’s betrayed him,” he rambled, grinning. “It’s like this for everyone, even him! It’s not just me.”

But Jiang Suizhou wasn’t listening.

His gaze was locked on those papers.

What had the emperor just said? Huo Wujiu’s brother betrayed him? Huo Wujiu had only one “brother”—technically his cousin by blood. And that was Huo Yuyan.

In an instant, clarity struck Jiang Suizhou. Every lingering question suddenly had an answer.

What caused Huo Wujiu’s unexpected defeat? Why was he so hesitant to return north, even after his legs healed? Why did historical records note the early demise of Huo Yuyan? And why would Huo Wujiu return to guard Yangguan in solitude until his death?

All of it stemmed from Huo Yuyan’s betrayal!

Breathing hard, Jiang Suizhou thrashed and strained against his bonds, to no effect. No matter how he struggled, his limbs were just too tightly bound.

Meanwhile, Jiang Shunheng carelessly released the papers, letting them flutter back to the ground.

“Everyone’s like this,” he murmured, tilting his head back and upending the empty wine jug over his mouth.

Jiang Suizhou suddenly wrenched himself forward with desperate strength, tearing open one of his wounds. As agony lanced through him, his body jerked sideways, and his temple struck the golden dragon carved into the armrest of the throne.

The pain wiped his mind blank for a moment, but an epiphany immediately followed.

The throne!

He didn’t know why the emperor had bound him here, but today was undoubtedly meant to be his last. No one else was around to help either—the two of them were alone in that opulent hall. He had to seize whatever sliver of hope he could find if he intended to survive.

Gritting his teeth, he swallowed the metallic tang of blood rising in his throat and forced himself to sit straighter, shifting slightly to the side.

His bound hands, tied behind his back, brushed against the jagged edges of the golden dragon carved into the throne.

Clenching his jaw, he pressed the ropes against the dragon’s ridges and began sawing.

His movements were cautious, and the emperor, drunk and oblivious, didn’t notice. He slumped against a vermilion-lacquered pillar nearby.

“But you—you’re the one I hate most,” the emperor said. “The day your witch of a mother birthed you, she should’ve known this day would come. When Father doted on you like you were a gift from the heavens, he should’ve known too.”

Then he shook his head.

“But today, all debts between us will be settled.”

Jiang Suizhou poured every last shred of strength into his arms, lips pressed tight, afraid to make any sound that might betray him.

Luckily, the emperor didn’t seem to expect a reply.

“Today, you’ll die here in my place,” he announced as he stretched his legs out casually. “Consider it your final favor to me. I promise—after

this, I’ll stop hating you.”

He laughed, the sound thick with wine.

Just then, a eunuch called urgently from the other side of the door. “Your Majesty! Everything is prepared! Please, come quickly!”

The emperor grunted in annoyance and unsteadily pushed himself to his feet.

“Don’t resent me in the next life,” he said to Jiang Suizhou. “Resent Father instead—for giving you too much and for spoiling you to death.”

With that, he staggered down the steps. He stopped briefly at the doorway, illuminated by the flickering light of the towering golden candlestick at the entrance. He turned back and flashed Jiang Suizhou a grin.

Then he raised a hand and knocked it to the floor.

The flames, small at first, began to lick hungrily at the ample kindling.

Chapter 92

HEATED AIR SURGED as the emperor strode out of the hall.

Jiang Suizhou gritted his teeth and cursed under his breath.

Just who gave the emperor this stupid idea—to burn him alive on the throne in order to fake his own death?

Desperately, he twisted his broken body even harder, positioning himself to more effectively grind the ropes against the carvings on the throne.

At least this plan hadn't killed him instantly. At least there was still a chance.

But the hall was draped in silk and furs—perfect fuel for a devastating inferno. The fire spread rapidly, devouring everything in a blazing tide. As the smoke thickened and choked the air out of him in coughs and gasps, Jiang Suizhou didn't dare pause in his work. Jaw clenched, he kept sawing.

By this point, his wrists had been rubbed raw, and many of his injuries had reopened from the strain. Fresh blood seeped through his robes and sweat dripped down his temples. Where sweat met wounds, it stung like acid.

His entire body trembled, and his vision blurred from pain and exhaustion. The world narrowed to nothing but crackling fire and unbearable heat. Everything else faded away. Even the pain and fatigue dulled to the point he could no longer feel them.

His hands moved mechanically back and forth, back and forth.

The flames continued to spread, swallowing brocade curtains in a raucous blur of gold and scarlet.

As the sea of fire slowly consumed the hall, there came a quiet snap.

The rope gave way, and Jiang Suizhou collapsed against the throne.

The pain from the hard impact jolted him back to awareness.

It had worked!

Tears spilled unbidden as he scrambled up, ignoring everything else to fumble at the bonds around his legs. His hands shook violently, his strength already spent, but the knots loosened after a few attempts.

Lurching to his feet, he gripped the throne for balance and squinted blearily around him.

The hall was an inferno. The main entrance was completely blocked, but to the east, a smaller door had only just caught fire. A narrow gap remained, enough for him to escape through.

Jiang Suizhou ran toward it.

But after a few steps, he stopped and turned back.

His gaze locked on the overturned desk. The papers and books scattered on the floor around it appeared to be untouched by the flames.

The letters!

Without hesitation, he threw himself toward them. His exhausted legs gave out beneath him, and he crashed onto the pile of documents.

He tore through them desperately.

There was no way he would allow those letters from Huo Yuyan to burn here. He couldn’t! They were the proof Huo Wujiu needed; the truth he needed to hear more than anything. They alone could tell him why he’d lost and warn him that Great Liang was no longer his home but a den of wolves.

They were the proof that Huo Yuyan had orchestrated it all.

His hands shook violently, far beyond his control. His strength was spent—wasted on all the pain, weakness, and exhaustion—yet he somehow eked out a final burst of energy and found those precious letters in the mess on the floor.

He scanned the words by the light of the fire, then shoved the papers into his robes.

But as he grabbed the desk and hauled himself upright, he saw that the narrow door had been engulfed by the flames during his brief search.

The wood crackled and popped before succumbing entirely and crashing into the blazing expanse all around it.

There was no escape.

Jiang Suizhou forced himself to remain upright as he scanned the area in desperation, but it was to no avail. There really was no other way out.

He leaned against the desk as the last of his strength drained from his body; then he crumpled to the floor.

At some point during the chaos, two tears had dripped down his face and were now clinging to his chin. He wiped them away. Truly, he was a mess.

Did I come here for nothing?

When he opened his eyes again, would he be in the underworld? Or would he be back at his desk, staring at that ridiculous student thesis on his laptop screen?

He also couldn't help but wonder if history would change because of him. Would Huo Wujiu's tale be different for having met him?

Jiang Suizhou's only regret was that he couldn't hand the evidence in his robes over to Huo Wujiu.

Well…perhaps he had just one more regret.

He also regretted not being able to see Huo Wujiu one last time before he died.

Never before in either of his lifetimes had Jiang Suizhou tasted the sweetness of love and the bitter pain of wanting someone he couldn't have.

He closed his eyes.

The moment he let his guard down, all the adrenaline-suppressed exhaustion overtook him in one massive wave. He'd pushed his body and his will to the limit. It was time to pay the price.

His head was spinning, his whole body was racked with pain, and all he wanted to do was close his eyes and just sleep…

No sooner had he closed his eyes than they snapped open again at the sound of a deafening crash.

He looked up. There was now a large hole in the ceiling, where a beam at the front of the hall had finally succumbed to the flames and collapsed to reveal a scrap of clear, blue sky.

Next would be the ceiling above him.

Jiang Suizhou fixed his tired gaze on that patch of sky for as long as he could.

Then, utterly spent, he closed his eyes.

***

Huo Wujiu fought his way through the palace. By the time he reached the emperor's bedchambers, his armor was coated in a thick sheen of blood. But right now, that didn't matter to him.

His attention was focused entirely on the sea of fire before him.

Some of his soldiers frantically attempted to put it out, but there was no water. Nearby, a small group of prisoners knelt on the floor—including the drunken and disheveled Emperor of Jing, who'd been securely tied up.

Huo Wujiu ran forward.

"General! This bastard just said that the Prince of Jing is in there!" called the soldier guarding them.

Huo Wujiu looked up in horror at the wall of flames, the reflection flickering red and gold in his dark eyes.

"It's starting to collapse, General, what can we—"

Before the soldier could finish speaking, a flash of crimson swept past him, and a gasp rippled through the crowd.

Their general ran up the white marble steps, his scarlet cloak fluttering behind him. Then he leaped onto the roof and plunged into the sea of fire below.

"General!"

Shouts of alarm erupted all around, and the soldiers panicked.

The emperor, who was still tied up on the ground, burst into laughter.

“Excellent! Two birds with one stone,” he crowed. “I’ve not lost at all.”

His comment succeeded in enraging one of the soldiers nearby, who drew his saber with the intent to kill him.

“Don’t be reckless!” his comrade told him, forcibly holding him back. “The general hasn’t given an order. We can’t kill a prisoner!”

“But the general…”

He found himself interrupted by a thunderous roar, and everyone looked up to see the majestic imperial bedchamber collapsing into the inferno.

The emperor’s laughter grew more unhinged.

“What are you waiting for? Do it already!” he laughed. “Kill me! Avenge your beloved general!”

Not a second later, his smile froze, and his laughter abruptly cut off.

There, framed by fire and ruin, stood Huo Wujiu. In his arms was a frail man whose robes trailed behind him. In the very instant the hall collapsed, Huo Wujiu leaped out of the palace, using the crumbling roof as a launching point.

He was covered in blood, and his cloak was singed, but he was alive. Tiny spots of flame sprang up from the burning cloak, the sparks rising and blending with the crimson fabric.

“The general is out!”

Cheers of relief erupted from the soldiers.

Huo Wujiu landed and extinguished the flames on his cloak with a simple flick.

Lowering himself to one knee, he held the man carefully and reverently in his arms.

Soldiers immediately rushed forward, but Huo Wujiu quickly stopped them. His voice was hoarse and low, but the gravity of his command cut through the chaos like a knife.

“Find a doctor. Hurry.”

The crowd scattered at once. No one dared hesitate.

Huo Wujiu knelt on the white marble floor in front of the burning rubble of the emperor’s quarters. Cradling Jiang Suizhou in one arm, he lifted the other to gently stroke his face with the back of his hand.

He wanted to wake him, but he feared such a touch might be the thing to break him completely.

“Jiang Suizhou,” he whispered. “Suizhou, open your eyes.”

Just then, Wei Kai arrived with his troops. He stopped dead in his tracks at the scene before him.

He saw the charred marks on his general’s cloak. He saw his general’s red-rimmed eyes glistening with tears as he knelt there embracing the motionless Prince of Jing.

He saw his general hunched over, clearly uninjured, yet the very picture of a wounded beast—shot in its vital organs, clinging to life.

Wei Kai couldn’t stop himself from tearing up at the sight.

Just then, a faint sound came from Huo Wujiu’s arms—the sound of Jiang Suizhou weakly coughing.

Wei Kai took an impulsive step forward, then froze in place. He held himself back and watched as the Prince of Jing coughed a few more times, his eyelashes fluttering.

The Prince of Jing opened his eyes, just barely.

“Jiang Suizhou!” Huo Wujiu’s hands around him started to tremble.

Jiang Suizhou coughed again, then struggled to raise his hand.

“What’s wrong? Are you in pain anywhere?” Huo Wujiu breathed, visibly panicked. “Don’t worry, the physician is on his way.”

Jiang Suizhou raised his hand and placed it on his chest.

“Here,” he murmured, the word almost inaudible over the roar of the fire.

“You’re hurt here?” Huo Wujiu reached out to touch him.

But Jiang Suizhou proceeded to silently, painstakingly rummage around in his robe to pull out a few pages of paper.

Huo Wujiu took them and glanced at them. Each page was stained with blotches of fresh blood—all of it Jiang Suizhou's. Uncomprehending, Huo Wujiu hastily pushed away the pages.

"Now's not the time! Why are you giving me these?!"

In his exasperated and terror-stricken state, his voice came out in a low, anguished bark directed at Jiang Suizhou. At the same time, the tears welling up in his eyes finally escaped down his cheeks.

Two large, round tears plopped onto the bloodstained papers.

Jiang Suizhou tried to smile but couldn't quite manage it.

Expending the last of his strength, he lifted his hand and gently touched Huo Wujiu's face. When he spoke, it was with the feeble but determined will of a man delivering his final words.

"Because I never dared to tell you before," he said softly. "I love you. This is all I can do for you."

Chapter 93

HIS VOICE WAS SO FAINT it was barely a whisper. Before he could finish, his eyes were already closed.

The veins on the back of Huo Wujiu's hand bulged, and his lips began to tremble.

He couldn't describe what he was feeling.

These were the very words he had been longing to hear—that he didn't dare even imagine might be true—and yet hearing them now only made the ache unbearable. It tore his heart to shreds. The pain was so intense he felt like his breath would cease altogether.

He couldn't speak. He just trembled as he checked for Jiang Suizhou's breathing.

There.

It was so weak he could barely feel it, but it was unmistakably there. A fragile but steady intake of air amid the scorching heat and flame.

To Huo Wujiu, it felt like a lifeline in the midst of utter despair. Those tiny, shallow breaths were enough to hold up his plummeting heart.

"It's all right," he croaked out, his voice shaking. "You'll be all right. Don't worry; there's no one who can hurt you now."

Though he spoke to Jiang Suizhou, the underlying confusion and sheer terror in his voice betrayed the fact that this reassurance was directed more toward himself.

He looked up to see a frantic soldier dragging a frazzled, stumbling imperial physician behind him through the palace gates. Huo Wujiu carefully adjusted his grip on Jiang Suizhou and stood up.

"Have the physician follow immediately," he instructed Wei Kai.

His expression was a perfectly calm, solemn mask, but Wei Kai could see the pure panic hidden behind his bloodshot, glistening eyes.

Wei Kai quickly assented and went to meet the physician. Huo Wujiu, holding Jiang Suizhou and the letters, turned and headed directly into a nearby, undamaged palace chamber.

He took only two steps, then stopped and turned back to look at the emperor.

Jiang Shunheng sat slumped on the ground. Although his face was flushed from the wine and his body limp, his gaze was hateful and malevolent, fixed intently on Jiang Suizhou in Huo Wujiu's arms.

Huo Wujiu looked down at him for a moment. Then he turned and left.

"Bind him up tight," he called over his shoulder, "and throw him into the fire."

***

Outside, the city was in an uproar.

The army had just entered the imperial palace and seized all the servants and concubines. Huo Wujiu's soldiers were everywhere, the emperor was dead, and everyone was busy fighting the resulting fires.

Inside the hall, one could hear a pin drop.

The imperial physician's hand was quite unsteady as he took his patient's pulse.

He wasn't used to working in such a tense atmosphere, with soldiers in full battle regalia encircling him menacingly. By the patient's bedside stood a general wearing armor streaked with blood. He insisted on watching the physician with piercing eyes.

Truly, he looked as if he would snap the physician's neck the moment the man on the bed was in any danger.

And he was fully capable of doing so.

After all, this was the same man who had just led his army into the city and killed the emperor.

The physician finished his work and finally let out a breath of relief. He dropped to his knees with a thud, bowing deeply at Huo Wujiu's feet.

"Worry not, General!" he said. "Though the Prince of Jing was tortured, his injuries aren't too severe. He's lost a lot of blood, and he's very weak from stress and exhaustion. That's why he fainted—he overtaxed his strength! I will now prepare medicine for His Highness and tend to his wounds, and then we can just wait for him to wake up!"

A soft sigh broke the silence.

Huo Wujiu finally let out the breath he'd been unconsciously holding the whole time. As if the adrenaline were the only thing keeping him upright, he swayed unsteadily and leaned against the bedpost.

"He's fine?" Huo Wujiu asked.

The physician nodded repeatedly. "He is! General, please be at ease!"

Huo Wujiu released another slow, steady breath.

"Go apply the medicine," he said. "Wei Kai, go to the Prince of Jing's residence at once and bring Li Changning here."

"Yes, sir!" Wei Kai hurried out.

Leaning against the bedpost, Huo Wujiu looked down at Jiang Suizhou.

He still wore his court robes, now torn and stained crimson, infusing the bedding with the coppery stench of old blood. His hair fanned out across the pillow, with several disheveled strands stuck to the dark red splotches on his ashen cheeks. The smears of blood stood out in stark, gruesome contrast against his pale skin.

When the physician returned with his medicine chest, he witnessed an unbelievable sight.

Although mere minutes ago the fierce-looking general had been glaring daggers at him as he worked, now he knelt awkwardly at the bedside to tenderly brush strands of hair from the prince's face.

His touch was gentle, and his hands actually shook a little due to his excessive caution.

The physician quickly lowered his eyes, pretending not to see.

Just then, a general rushed in.

It was Ji Hongcheng.

“General!” He hurried a few steps inside. “General Lou sent me to report that Pang Wei and his army have nearly reached the city!”

Huo Wujiu’s hand, resting beside Jiang Suizhou’s face, paused.

“How many?”

“It’s hard to get an accurate count right now, but at least a hundred thousand,” Ji Hongcheng answered. “Going by their formation, it’s definitely not the full three hundred thousand. Pang Wei must have come in a rush.”

Huo Wujiu didn’t reply at first.

He wanted to stay here with Jiang Suizhou—to watch the physician tend to him, to wait at his side until he woke up.

But he hadn’t forgotten who was at fault for all of this in the first place. If not for Pang Shao and Pang Wei’s reckless gamble, Huo Wujiu would never have left Jiang Suizhou alone in the city. They had forced his hand, and Pang Shao and Jiang Shunheng had taken advantage of his absence.

This debt had to be repaid.

He carefully brushed Jiang Suizhou’s cheek with his knuckles, then used one hand to brace himself on the edge of the bed and stood up.

“I’ll go at once,” he said.

Ji Hongcheng agreed and turned to lead the way.

But Huo Wujiu paused and added, “You stay here.”

Ji Hongcheng glanced up at him, startled.

“Does the general have any other orders for me?”

Seeing Huo Wujiu’s serious and cold expression, he wondered if there were still enemies left in the imperial palace. Or perhaps there was some unstable agent in Lin’an that might collude with the enemy and lead to defeat?

But Huo Wujiu merely nodded in the direction of the imperial physician by the door, who was still holding his medicine chest.

“Watch him,” he said. “Make sure he treats the prince properly. If he tries anything, kill him.”

***

Jiang Suizhou’s consciousness began to dimly return.

At first, he only vaguely felt a change in his body. It was a refreshing feeling he hadn’t experienced in days, as if all the blood caked on his skin had been cleaned off. Then came the bitter smell of medicine, mixed with the faint coppery tint of blood.

His eyelashes twitched. He could sense some light.

He frowned and immediately heard a quiet clinking next to him.

Someone seemed to be standing guard by the bed, leaning over the edge to get closer.

Jiang Suizhou again struggled to open his eyes—only to be temporarily blinded by the light from the candles, which suddenly seemed far too bright. As his eyes closed again, he heard a familiar, if somewhat hoarse, voice.

“You’re awake?”

It was Huo Wujiu.

Jiang Suizhou’s foggy mind cleared a little. He forced his eyes open and saw Huo Wujiu by the bed, framed by the bright candlelight and the layered bed-curtains.

“You—”

The moment Jiang Suizhou tried to speak, pain spasmed in his throat, and all he could do was cough. The motion tugged at his wounds and sent sharp pains shooting throughout his body, and he took ragged, gasping breaths between coughs.

Huo Wujiu fumbled around in a panic, driven to help but afraid of accidentally hurting him. He thought to rub his back, but he ended up just holding him in his arms, his body stiff and motionless so as not to risk causing any discomfort.

“Li Changning!” Huo Wujiu called out anxiously.

Hurried footsteps came from a distance. Li Changning rushed over to check Jiang Suizhou’s pulse and inspect his wounds.

“Be at ease, General. It’s nothing serious,” Li Changning said. “It’s just the lingering effects of inhaling so much smoke from the fire. A couple of doses of medicine and a few days of rest, and he’ll be fine.”

Huo Wujiu finally let out a sigh of relief. “That’s good. Is the medicine still on the stove? Go tend to it.”

Li Changning nodded and left to do so.

After a few more coughs, Jiang Suizhou’s memories began to return.

He vividly recalled sitting on the throne as the drunken emperor taunted him, and then watching flames ravage the entire hall. He remembered scrambling to gather up the evidence of Huo Yuyan’s betrayal.

He remembered collapsing to the floor and letting the exhaustion consume him as the roof crumbled in flames.

That was the last clear memory he had. Everything after that was so foggy, he wasn’t sure how much of it he’d simply hallucinated.

Amid the roaring fire and chaos, he thought he heard Huo Wujiu’s voice calling to him. The next thing he knew, he was in a familiar embrace.

At the time, he believed his final wish had been granted by the heavens. Surely this was nothing but a divine vision.

But now, it seemed…it might have all been real.

And then, with dawning horror, Jiang Suizhou felt his heart seize up.

There was one more thing he remembered: He’d summoned all his remaining strength to show those pages of evidence to Huo Wujiu and to tell him that… That…

It seemed he had actually taken advantage of his “impending death” to speak the words in his heart.

His coughing gradually stopped, and he nervously stole a glance at Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu hadn’t even had time to change. He was still wearing his heavy dark armor, covered in dried, dark-red bloodstains. As he turned to go to the table and pour tea, Jiang Suizhou noticed the scorched and tattered red cloak on his back. Presumably, no one dared remind him to change it.

He headed back to the bedside and panic flooded Jiang Suizhou’s mind. For a moment, he considered just closing his eyes and pretending he’d never woken up at all.

But it was much too late for that. Huo Wujiu had propped him up earlier, and with his injuries slowing him down, Jiang Suizhou couldn’t lie back down in time.

In the blink of an eye, Huo Wujiu returned to hold a cup of warm tea to his lips.

“Moisten your throat first,” Huo Wujiu said. “Li Changning’s medicine will be ready soon.”

Jiang Suizhou reached out to take the cup, but Huo Wujiu grabbed his wrist and pushed his hand back beneath the blankets.

“Don’t move,” Huo Wujiu said.

Unable to argue, Jiang Suizhou drank a few sips as his heart pounded.

Huo Wujiu probably didn’t expect this either. He must be so confused! When he first met me, he thought I was gay, but then I told him I wasn’t… and now suddenly I’ve done a one-eighty and said I loved him. Straight men usually hate that kind of thing. Maybe he’s only being nice to me now because of the evidence I found for him…

Jiang Suizhou’s thoughts continued to flail in circles all the way until the tea was gone.

Huo Wujiu pulled back the empty cup, and Jiang Suizhou quickly tried to find a topic of conversation to ease his embarrassment.

“Where are Pang Shao and Jiang Shunheng?” he asked.

“Jiang Shunheng burned to death. Pang Shao is in prison,” Huo Wujiu answered bluntly, setting down the cup.

“And Pang Wei…?”

“He panicked when his father was captured and came here with only a hundred thousand or so troops. He arrived this morning and was captured by dusk. He tricked his soldiers into thinking they were coming to help the emperor, but when they found out they were fighting against their own General Lou, they refused. It didn’t take much effort,” Huo Wujiu said.

Jiang Suizhou let out a sigh of relief. “That’s good. Then…”

“Didn’t you hear what Li Changning said? He told you to rest,” Huo Wujiu interrupted. “You don’t need to speak so much right after waking up.”

It was a scolding, but Huo Wujiu’s tone was oddly gentle…almost tender.

Assuming he must have misinterpreted, Jiang Suizhou awkwardly fell silent.

To Huo Wujiu, his expression looked to be of hurt indignation. The sight melted his heart instantly.

He walked back to the bed and dropped to one knee, bringing his eyes level with Jiang Suizhou’s.

“If you wish to talk, how about I ask the questions?” Huo Wujiu said, looking at him.

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

Huo Wujiu watched him for a while, then reached out to brush his knuckles across Jiang Suizhou’s cheek. As he spoke, he traced a soft line.

“Then I’ll ask you this: Do you remember what you told me today?”

His face was perfectly serious—stoic, even—but within his eyes shone a soft joy that all but overflowed.

Chapter 94

SOMETHING DROPPED IN Jiang Suizhou's chest, and his mind went blank.

Flustered, he opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

He paused for a long, long time.

"No," he stammered eventually. "I-I just…"

As Jiang Suizhou floundered, Huo Wujiu grinned, his gaze never leaving him.

"I see," he said. "You just panicked and told me the truth."

"I—"

Jiang Suizhou started to speak, but Huo Wujiu cut him off by reaching under the blankets to take his hand.

In the past, Huo Wujiu only ever took him by his wrist, with his sleeve as a barrier between them. This time, he placed his palm directly over the back of Jiang Suizhou's hand, completely engulfing it.

Jiang Suizhou was stunned.

As his mind cleared, the meaning of this gesture began to sink in.

Huo Wujiu's rough palm, calloused from years of training, lacked the composure of the face above it. As if trying to hold back a storm of raging emotions, his fingers clenched Jiang Suizhou's so tightly it made his knuckles ache.

Apparently still unsatisfied, Huo Wujiu then pulled his hand from under the covers to encase it between both of his own.

Jiang Suizhou stared at him, bewildered.

Could this reaction mean he felt the same way…?

In that moment, so many little oddities suddenly made sense: Huo Wujiu's every look, every smile, and even his seemingly random bouts of unhappiness.

But still…it felt surreal.

How could it be? How could someone like Huo Wujiu secretly feel the same way about someone like me…?

The shock of the revelation was so intense that for a moment, he forgot to feel happy.

Kneeling by the bed, Huo Wujiu pulled Jiang Suizhou's hand forward and pressed it to his face.

"I wish you'd panicked and confessed sooner," he said in a low, almost dazed voice, like he was talking to himself. As soon as he spoke, he immediately contradicted himself. "No, I shouldn't have made you say it first." He frowned. "But…I can't believe I didn't suspect this at all."

"…I didn't realize either," Jiang Suizhou mumbled.

"Of course I couldn't risk you finding out," Huo Wujiu said matter-of-factly. "You told me you weren't a cut-sleeve, after all. What if you figured out what's been on my mind, and it ended up scaring you off? I couldn't very well tie you up and bring you back again."

"B-but I'm really not," Jiang Suizhou blurted out. "A cut-sleeve, I mean. I'm just…"

He caught himself mid-sentence and swallowed the rest of his words.

It was strange. He'd spent the last few months saying all sorts of terrible things to people, just to avoid arousing suspicion, and he'd always been able to act naturally, as if it didn't faze him. But now, all he wanted to do was tell Huo Wujiu the simple truth, yet he couldn't get the words out.

Even though Huo Wujiu's hands felt so warm around his; even though there seemed to be a fire roaring in his chest.

He fell silent, but somehow, Huo Wujiu seemed to understand. He gazed at Jiang Suizhou with burning intensity.

Then he laughed softly—deep and pleasant, a low rumble that vibrated through his chest and into Jiang Suizhou's hand.

As if that weren't overwhelming enough, Huo Wujiu squeezed the hand in his, then brought it from his cheek to his lips, where he pressed a deep kiss onto his fingers.

As he held them tight against his mouth, a sigh mixed with laughter brushed against Jiang Suizhou’s knuckles.

Instantly, Jiang Suizhou’s ears flushed deep red. He tried to pull his hand away, but Huo Wujiu just held on tighter.

It was all too much! His warm breath, and his smile, and that gaze of his… Jiang Suizhou instinctively averted his eyes, flustered. There was no problem on Earth that couldn’t be solved by burying one’s head in the sand, after all.

Alas, his evasive maneuvers only seemed to further delight his aggressor.

Another ripple of low, muffled laughter passed through those warm lips into his knuckles and up his arm, making every nerve tingle along the way.

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Huo Wujiu’s soldiers were extremely efficient.

Ironically, this efficiency was largely due to Huo Yuyan’s machinations earlier in the year. When he secretly turned Wu Qianfan against Huo Wujiu, then killed him to ensure his silence, he succeeded in isolating Huo Wujiu. However, that was more or less *all* he did.

Huo Wujiu commanded several times more troops than Huo Yuyan ever did, and since most of Huo Yuyan's forces were deployed around Yecheng, he couldn't spare the manpower to replace the army north of the river.

In other words, with Li Sheng and his inner circle dead, all two hundred thousand soldiers left to defend the Yangtze were Huo Wujiu's personal elite forces.

That was how they managed to bring both the palace and the city of Lin'an firmly under their control in the span of a single day. They even ensured that every court official's residence was heavily guarded. After Pang Wei's death, Huo Wujiu divided the troops outside the city into several units and sent them out to bring the other various counties in Southern Jing under their control.

By late night, peace had settled over the city.

When Li Changning brought the medicine he had brewed, he instructed Jiang Suizhou to rest as much as possible over the next few days and avoid any stress, as it would hinder his wounds healing. So, not long after Jiang Suizhou finished his medicine, Huo Wujiu insisted that he go to sleep. Then, after ensuring that Jiang Suizhou was indeed asleep, he quietly left the hall.

Next door, the emperor's bedchamber was now a blackened, deserted ruin. Wei Kai waited in the hall near the entrance, along with Meng Qianshan, who was pacing around anxiously, eyes bloodshot with worry.

The instant he saw Huo Wujiu emerge from the room, Meng Qianshan hurried forward.

"General!"

Huo Wujiu waved a hand. "His Highness is fine. Go in and serve him, but be quiet about it. He's already asleep."

Meng Qianshan muttered affirmations repeatedly, bowing deeply to thank him, then turned and entered the hall with soft steps.

Next, Wei Kai stepped forward.

"General, I've prepared a place for you to stay. It's not far from here; I'll show you the way."

Huo Wujiu grunted a vague acknowledgment and followed him.

As they walked, Wei Kai couldn't help but note that his general's steps seemed unusually light.

Is he truly just that relieved to see the Prince of Jing wasn't seriously hurt? No, I must be mistaken…

But the moment they entered the palace hall, it became clear that Wei Kai's misunderstanding was, in fact, not a misunderstanding after all.

The hall was full of people—staff brought from the prince's residence and soldiers from the army. Wei Kai led him around, pointing out where the front hall and bedrooms were and explaining how the city and palace were being managed…but his general was already distracted.

Huo Wujiu merely wandered around the room as if he hadn't heard a word. When they reached his personal quarters, he casually plopped down on the nearby daybed and poured himself a cup of tea.

Seeing this, Wei Kai waved for the attending servants to leave.

When he looked back, he saw his general holding the teacup in one hand, not drinking. He just stared at the surface of the liquid, as if lost in thought.

Wei Kai frowned.

Had someone tampered with the tea? Maybe the general had noticed something off about it.

Quickly stepping forward, Wei Kai inquired, "General…?"

But before he could ask anything about the tea, Huo Wujiu looked up at him. Though he hadn't moved at all, let alone laughed or smiled, the genuine happiness in his eyes was impossible to hide. His entire being positively glowed with a strange, vibrant energy.

Wei Kai could only stare at him, dumbfounded.

"General!" he finally managed to exclaim.

But after placing the teacup on the table, his general only planted one foot on the edge of the daybed, rested an arm on his knee, then smiled widely.

“What’s with that face? You look like someone’s just died,” he said. “Smile for me.”

Baffled but obedient, Wei Kai did his best to force a smile.

“General, do you have some good news to share?” he asked.

Huo Wujiu raised an eyebrow. “And what makes you think that?”

Wei Kai sighed. The general always became a little bit obnoxious when he was happy, but that was to be expected. This was a man who had never known restraint, after all.

Even so, he was taking it to a new extreme today.

This had to be some seriously good news.

Suddenly, Wei Kai’s heart skipped a beat. A vague, nebulous guess formed in his mind.

“General,” he ventured cautiously. “Could it be that you…and the Prince of Jing…?”

Before he could finish asking the question, his general silently answered it. His face broke into a beaming grin and the hand resting on his knee began to tap excitedly, like a dog wagging its tail.

Wei Kai hadn’t expected his untoward guess to be true. Infected by his general’s radiant joy, Wei Kai felt a genuine smile light up his own face as well.

“So the Prince of Jing really is a—”

Huo Wujiu clicked his tongue sharply and shot him a warning look.

“Mind your own business,” he said. “And since you clearly have the time, make sure your troops are out patrolling the palace and the city before midnight. Lead them yourself, while you have the time. Pay special attention to the homes of ministers, as well as the concubines, eunuchs, and maids that are being held inside the palace. Make sure no one raises any trouble.”

Wei Kai secretly pouted.

“Yes,” he said with some resentment.

Huo Wujiu waved his hand. “Then get out of here.”

Grumbling to himself, Wei Kai left the room.

Now alone in the hall, Huo Wujiu stared absently at a flickering candle for a moment, his lips gradually, subconsciously curving into a smile.

He couldn’t help but jump off the daybed to pace back and forth.

But the room wasn’t large enough. Even the entire wing of the palace—seven rooms wide and so spacious he could barely see one end from the other—wasn’t large enough. He paced a few laps but experienced no relief.

A powerful emotion surged up and down his every limb, filling him with intense excitement that seemed to have no outlet.

He couldn’t stop smiling, but smiling didn’t help. He felt like he needed to take his horse and gallop through vast grasslands beneath the moonlight…but the imperial palace didn’t have such grasslands, only a chain of majestic buildings that stretched to the horizon.

On second thought, maybe he needed to fight against a harrowing opponent? Someone who could push him to his limits until he was thoroughly exhausted. But who would that be? No one in Southern Jing could be a worthy match for him anymore.

Or…perhaps what he needed most was to see Jiang Suizhou again.

He didn’t need to do anything else but just look at him, stand guard at his bedside, maybe gently graze against him. Any of these would be enough to make his agitation disappear.

But Li Changning had said that Jiang Suizhou needed to rest, and he was right. Jiang Suizhou needed all the rest he could get. The image of him on death’s door was still fresh in Huo Wujiu’s mind.

Moreover, Jiang Suizhou was a light sleeper. In the interest of his health, Huo Wujiu had maintained his solemn facade and left so he could sleep undisturbed. He didn’t dare sneak back into Jiang Suizhou’s room, no matter how many times he paced his own like a caged beast.

Suddenly, he stopped, and throwing his head back, he downed the rest of the tea he’d poured earlier. Then he pushed open the door and walked out.

That night, the candles in Huo Wujiu’s wing of the palace burned until dawn, yet the vast hall remained empty.

In the courtyard, the air was heavy with dew, and the vast sky was full of stars. The expanse of starlight seemed to be contained neatly within the palace walls, softly illuminating the magnificent glazed tiles until the sun began to peek over the horizon.

No one knew that Huo Wujiu had spent the entire night alone, sitting on the white marble steps in front of Jiang Suizhou’s door until daybreak.

Never before in his life had he spent so long gazing quietly up at the stars, nor had he ever been filled with such calming warmth, simply by listening to someone breathe.

Chapter 95

NOT LONG AFTER Jiang Suizhou woke the next day, Huo Wujiu arrived.

He looked refreshed, as if he had slept well the night before. But even though it was summer, he brought with him a damp, chilly air, like he had rolled around in the imperial gardens just before sunrise.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't help but sneak several glances at him.

"What?" Huo Wujiu asked when he inevitably caught Jiang Suizhou staring at him.

Jiang Suizhou steadily met his gaze. Huo Wujiu's eyes blazed with a startling amount of energy, but beneath them was a smudged, shadowy bruise.

As he watched Huo Wujiu, Jiang Suizhou's brow twitched, and the lingering anxiety hanging over his head suddenly dissipated like smoke.

He couldn't help but smile.

"You didn't sleep well last night?" he asked.

Huo Wujiu instinctively denied it. "I slept fine."

Jiang Suizhou didn't say anything, but his eyes lingered on the dark circles under Huo Wujiu's eyes.

This didn't escape Huo Wujiu's notice. He cleared his throat and sat by the bed, his expression serious.

"All right, fine. There were some urgent matters during the night, so I didn't get much sleep."

Jiang Suizhou smiled faintly and didn't press the issue.

The hall was filled with servants coming and going, setting up breakfast and tidying the rooms. Huo Wujiu didn't trust the palace's original staff, so everyone here was from the Prince of Jing's residence. Luckily, since they had so few people to wait upon, there were enough.

But with so many servants around, neither Jiang Suizhou nor Huo Wujiu said much.

The morning sun shone in through the windows, flooding the room with bright light. Jiang Suizhou looked up and saw Huo Wujiu sitting by the bed, backlit, watching him.

His posture was casual, his legs crossed, leaning back comfortably.

But his gaze was intense, almost burning.

Flustered, Jiang Suizhou looked away, suddenly very interested in the gold threads on his blanket instead.

Then he heard Huo Wujiu laugh softly.

He didn't know that as he looked down, the morning light on his face caught on his eyelashes in such a way that they seemed to glow. As Huo Wujiu took this in, he knew he'd made the right choice. It had been worth waiting at the door all night just for this. In fact, it was unquestionably the most worthwhile thing he'd ever done.

Jiang Suizhou cleared his throat, his ears feeling warm.

"So…I still don't know what's happening in Lin'an," he said awkwardly, attempting to find a suitable subject of conversation.

"Everything is under control, inside and out," Huo Wujiu assured him. "Don't worry about it. Just focus on your recovery."

Before Jiang Suizhou could ask anything more, Wei Kai came in carrying a bowl of foul-smelling dark liquid.

Unfortunately, it was time to take his medicine.

The smell of food in the room was immediately overpowered by the bitter scent of the herbs. Jiang Suizhou frowned, and he resigned himself to sitting up and getting it over with.

But Huo Wujiu stood up and swooped in before he could move a muscle, supporting his back with one hand and grabbing a pillow with the other.

"Be careful," Huo Wujiu said as he helped him settle back against the pillows. "You'll open your wounds."

The clean scent of soapberry mingled with the metallic smell of the armor, enveloping Jiang Suizhou securely within.

He lowered his eyes and awkwardly allowed Huo Wujiu to help him as Wei Kai stood by with the medicine.

But when Wei Kai moved to hand Jiang Suizhou the tray, Huo Wujiu immediately intercepted it and snatched the bowl himself.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Huo Wujiu scooped up a spoonful of piping hot medicine and blew lightly on it to cool it. He wasn't used to doing such things, and as a result, he managed to slop most of the medicine right back into the bowl, leaving only a tiny amount within the spoon.

A smile crept across Jiang Suizhou's face as he watched these events unfold.

Huo Wujiu cast a furtive glance at him, then stubbornly scooped up another spoonful.

"Ah, it's fine," Jiang Suizhou said quickly. "I'll do it myself."

He stretched an arm forward to take the bowl, but Huo Wujiu moved it out of his reach.

"You're still injured," he protested.

"But it's not like I'm completely helpless," Jiang Suizhou said gently. "It'll take forever to finish at this rate. Let me do it."

At this point, Jiang Suizhou had been in this body for half a year, after all. In that time, he'd been subjected to countless bowls of medicine. He was used to it. They were all bitter, and it was always preferable to down it all at once than suffer through it in tiny sips.

After a moment, though clearly reluctant, Huo Wujiu grudgingly handed the bowl to Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou set the jade spoon aside, cooled the medicine with an exhaled breath, and slowly drank the warm liquid straight from the bowl.

His movements were careful but practiced; even so, his brow still furrowed from the bitterness. He was so focused on getting the medicine down that he didn't notice the way Huo Wujiu's expression perfectly mirrored his own.

When the deed was done, Jiang Suizhou set the empty bowl down and attempted to sigh with relief…but the very second he opened his mouth, Huo Wujiu took the opportunity to pop something into it.

A burst of sweet juice spread across his tongue, chasing away every last trace of bitterness.

Startled, Jiang Suizhou looked up to discover that Huo Wujiu had moved a small table to his bedside. On that table sat a bowl of fruit sent as a tribute from the Western Regions: grapes.

Huo Wujiu was already peeling a second.

Though with a bow or a sword, his movements were dexterous and graceful, he was unexpectedly clumsy as he picked at the grape's skin. In fact, one would almost think he hated them the way he verged on squashing it to mush with all his fumbling.

Jiang Suizhou opened his mouth to speak—and instantly received another grape.

He swallowed it as quickly as possible.

"You don't have to do that," he said. "It's not that bitter."

Jiang Suizhou was an adult, after all. He wasn't so fragile that he couldn't simply wash it down with tea afterward as he always did. He was perfectly capable of handling a bit of bitterness.

Wei Kai laughed out loud.

"Your Highness doesn't know this, but the general hates bitter things the most."

In an instant, Huo Wujiu looked up from the grapes and shot Wei Kai a truly terrifying warning glare, his hands still covered in juice.

Unfazed, Wei Kai just grinned.

"The general rarely got sick as a child," he added. "But when he did, no one could get him to take his medicine. The old marquis would get so mad! But even beating him didn't work. He'd run around with a fever, trying to escape. Maybe because he's so afraid of bitter things himself, he just assumes you are too?"

“Are you truly this stupid, or do you simply find your head too heavy for your neck?” Huo Wujiu growled. “Get lost!”

Wei Kai skedaddled off, still laughing.

Huo Wujiu turned back, expression dark, to see Jiang Suizhou smiling at him.

“He’s full of nonsense,” Huo Wujiu blurted out.

But the look on Jiang Suizhou’s face made it clear he didn’t believe him.

“I can’t believe I didn’t realize,” Jiang Suizhou said with a laugh. “I even saw you drink medicine when you first came to the residence.”

Huo Wujiu hated Wei Kai’s loose tongue.

Of course he drank medicine then, but that didn’t mean he enjoyed it. Who would? It was bitter and tasted awful. Just one sip made him gag, but he wasn’t about to throw a tantrum like a child. He was a grown man.

As much as he loathed taking medicine, he hated being embarrassed even more.

Except…when he saw Jiang Suizhou’s smiling face, all that anger melted into something soft and sweet instead.

He couldn’t manage to be upset about any of it anymore; the person in front of him was far too charming.

Despite the fierce expression still plastered across Huo Wujiu’s face, Jiang Suizhou wasn’t afraid at all. He just kept smiling at him until finally, Huo Wujiu gritted his teeth, leaned in, and roughly wiped the grape juice from his thumb onto Jiang Suizhou’s lips.

“You find this funny? Stop grinning at me like that!”

Even though his words were harsh, laced within them was a reluctant and tender smile.

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Jiang Suizhou had the strange feeling that he was living with a big dog all of a sudden.

It made no sound, but it was always circling him, moving without a whisper. Every so often, it would sneak a lick, which was enough to send it wriggling with joy.

He had no idea where the feeling came from. After all, they had lived together for a while already, but their dynamic as roommates had been far different.

That day, Huo Wujiu stayed by his bed. He watched him take his medicine, then ate breakfast with him. Thanks to Huo Wujiu's intense staring, Jiang Suizhou was forced to eat an extra half bowl of porridge. His stomach felt full and warm, to the point he almost dozed off.

Just then, Wei Kai returned.

"General," he said. "General Lou is back from Yangzhou."

Huo Wujiu's brow furrowed slightly.

The situation in the capital had been urgent the last couple of days, and when he'd divided his forces yesterday, he became short on generals. Yangzhou was close to Lin'an, and its garrison had old ties to Lou Yue, so Huo Wujiu sent him to deal with Yangzhou and the surrounding counties.

His swift return meant the mission must have been completed successfully. If so, it was time to settle some personal issues between them.

Huo Wujiu grunted in acknowledgment, then stood up and bowed his head at Jiang Suizhou. "I have some business to take care of. I'll be back tonight."

Though he looked much the same as before, Jiang Suizhou picked up on the subtle change in his expression. His aura had grown colder, and he had the fierce bearing of someone who intended to settle old debts.

"What business?" Jiang Suizhou asked.

"It's nothing," Huo Wujiu insisted vaguely.

But Jiang Suizhou had a hunch.

Before Huo Wujiu first left to gather his troops, he told Jiang Suizhou that Lou Yue would protect him in the city. Shortly thereafter, Jiang

Suizhou found himself trapped at the palace. But it really wasn't Lou Yue's fault—his reach couldn't extend into the palace, and no one had expected the emperor to receive intel about Huo Wujiu's movements so soon.

Jiang Suizhou was worried that Lou Yue was the "business" Huo Wujiu had to take care of.

"Tell me the truth," Jiang Suizhou said. "Do you intend to confront Lou Yue about his actions the other day?"

Huo Wujiu said nothing. It served as a silent confirmation of Jiang Suizhou's guess.

Jiang Suizhou sighed.

"If it's because I was detained by Jiang Shunheng, then please don't. General Lou was very worried about me, but the palace's defenses were tight, and his men were outside the city," he explained gently. "I don't believe there was any way to prevent it, considering how quickly it all happened. Besides, Lou Yue threatened Jiang Shunheng using Pang Shao, didn't he? If not for that, I might not have been kept alive at all."

Huo Wujiu looked down, his voice growing softer.

"Don't talk nonsense," he said.

"That's it, isn't it? You want to put Lou Yue in his place over this," Jiang Suizhou pressed.

Huo Wujiu's fierce demeanor immediately deflated, like a mighty wolf lowering its tail.

"…But he was careless," Huo Wujiu insisted.

"Tell me, then, what could he have done?" Jiang Suizhou countered. "Stayed behind with me when Jiang Shunheng stopped me from leaving, just to get thrown in the dungeon with me?"

Huo Wujiu fell silent.

He was a tall man; while standing, he had to lower his head to speak to Jiang Suizhou. There was an air of dejection about him, and with his head down, he even looked a little pitiful. It made one want to pat his head and stroke his hair.

“Besides, he’s still your senior,” Jiang Suizhou said. “Just talk to him respectfully like a normal person. There’s no reason to yell at him or punish him again. We couldn’t have achieved what we did without him, could we?”

Huo Wujiu brooded silently for a moment.

“You make me sound like a monster,” he said quietly. “Here you are, pleading for his life as if I intended to kill him.”

Jiang Suizhou let out a small laugh.

To be fair, with the way Huo Wujiu had been acting, who wouldn’t be afraid? Regardless of whatever was going on in his mind, his behavior gave Jiang Suizhou pause. Admittedly, he genuinely was a little worried that he might just impulsively cut Lou Yue down on sight.

Meanwhile, Jiang Suizhou’s laugh only made Huo Wujiu more defiant.

He shot a glare at Wei Kai, who quickly got the message and ran out. Then, Huo Wujiu turned back to Jiang Suizhou and leaned over him, one hand pressed into the pillow beside Jiang Suizhou’s head.

Fully enveloped by Huo Wujiu’s shadow, Jiang Suizhou felt the breath catch in his lungs. The smile froze on his face. As the space between them shrank, the pressure it exerted only grew.

“Wh-what are you doing?” Jiang Suizhou stammered nervously.

Before answering, Huo Wujiu leaned in further. Now he had both arms braced on the bed, one on either side of Jiang Suizhou.

“I’ll listen to you,” he said.

He moved closer and closer until his forehead was only a hair’s breadth from Jiang Suizhou’s own, at which point the wounded look on his face faded, and the pressure surged tenfold.

Suddenly, the rather amorous undercurrent to his advances became glaringly obvious.

“But surely you’ll reward me in return, won’t you?” he asked softly.

Chapter 96

JIANG SUIZHOU pressed himself back against the pillow in desperation, but there wasn't even an inch of space left for him to retreat.

Seeing his flustered attempt to escape only encouraged Huo Wujiu's mischievous inclinations. Enthusiastically, he closed the last bit of distance between them, refusing to allow Jiang Suizhou to hide himself away.

Their warm breaths intermingled.

"Better hurry," Huo Wujiu said. "Don't keep General Lou waiting."

Jiang Suizhou had nowhere to go. Huo Wujiu's breath was warm and a little moist on his face, and it only made his frantic heart pound even harder against his chest.

"Then…then close your eyes," he said quietly.

Obediently, Huo Wujiu closed his eyes.

Jiang Suizhou's gaze lingered on his lips, watching them curve into a grin.

Hesitantly, Jiang Suizhou took a shaky breath and steeled himself for what he was about to do.

He closed his eyes, and then, despite his proximity to Huo Wujiu's lips, he stretched up to plant a kiss on his forehead.

It was over in a flash: a simple, chaste touch.

Huo Wujiu opened his eyes and saw that Jiang Suizhou had already pulled back.

"All right, there," Jiang Suizhou declared matter-of-factly. "You can go now."

He gazed at Huo Wujiu with innocent sincerity. Even with Huo Wujiu surrounding him on all sides, Jiang Suizhou maintained a sweet, guileless expression.

Huo Wujiu silently touched his own forehead.

That kiss had ended far too quickly. It’d been so fleeting it left no warmth, only the phantom sensation of something tender, like a fingertip grazing over one’s heart.

“That’s it?” he asked, clenching his jaw.

Suddenly feeling a bit guilty, Jiang Suizhou nodded meekly.

Huo Wujiu clicked his tongue.

The next thing Jiang Suizhou knew, a dark shadow fell over him, and Huo Wujiu’s face swooped in once more.

At the last second of his approach, he turned his head and kissed Jiang Suizhou’s lips hard.

Huo Wujiu had no experience whatsoever. Driven by impulse, it was less a kiss and more of a reckless collision of lips and teeth. He was like a wild beast that’d never learned how to play yet had pounced all the same. The resulting impact was painful, but not unpleasant, and undeniably passionate beyond words.

Though this kiss was far more intense, it didn’t last long either.

Huo Wujiu pulled away and rested his forehead against Jiang Suizhou’s, his voice low and hoarse as he chuckled.

“I’m leaving now,” he said quietly.

With that, he pushed himself to his feet. Before he turned and walked away, he reached out and wiped his thumb intimately across Jiang Suizhou’s lips.

Dazed, Jiang Suizhou stared at him as he confidently strode from the room. As the door closed, he raised a hand and brushed his knuckles lightly against his lips.

After a moment, he let out a soft laugh.

It really was like being bitten.

Meanwhile, Wei Kai stood ramrod-straight outside the hall. He waited patiently for a while until he heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

He looked up to see Huo Wujiu striding quickly toward him, his red cloak billowing wildly in his wake. Though he was merely walking, his

proud bearing brought to mind a vision of the legendary general astride a magnificent warhorse instead.

“General!” Wei Kai hurried forward, then abruptly halted when he caught sight of the general’s lips, glistening with moisture in the bright sunlight.

A surprised, somewhat foolish grin spread across his face, and his general looked at him askance.

It was then that Huo Wujiu landed a brutal, full-force kick that nearly knocked poor, unsuspecting Wei Kai to the floor.

Wei Kai yelped in pain and staggered from the powerful blow, but he managed to stay on his feet. His general hadn’t held back in the slightest, which was to be expected. Quite unexpected, however, was the wicked smirk on his face as he did so. It was broad enough to pull his lips back and reveal the faint glint of his canines.

As Huo Wujiu turned and walked away, he casually wiped his thumb across his lower lip.

Smug and cocky, like a wolf that had eaten its fill.

“Keep up,” he said.

His voice was as low and arrogant as ever.

And yet, Wei Kai had the distinct feeling that the general hadn’t kicked him because he’d done something wrong.

This was merely him joyfully letting loose.

Wei Kai grumbled to himself as he limped after him.

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The imperial palace, now heavily guarded, belonged entirely to Huo Wujiu.

Lou Yue waited anxiously in the imperial study, unable to sit still. When someone came to inform him that General Huo would arrive shortly, he instantly shot up from his chair and stood there, wringing his hands.

Soon enough, Huo Wujiu strode confidently into the room. He threw off his cloak and took a seat on the throne with zero hesitation.

Lou Yue stepped forward to greet him, but Huo Wujiu waved a hand. “That’s enough. Sit.”

Awkwardly, Lou Yue froze in place and clasped his hands in front of him.

Having watched Huo Wujiu grow up, he knew that this fearless, arrogant boy had matured into a man of his word—he never joked about what he intended to do, and he never broke a promise.

Lou Yue also knew that the situation was truly his fault. He had failed to carry out Huo Wujiu’s orders.

Moreover, he had also become quite fond of the Prince of Jing. Despite being entrusted with the prince’s safety, Lou Yue had allowed him to be detained under his very nose and then subjected to such cruel torture that it had nearly claimed his life! The thought filled him with such shame and guilt that it almost made him wish that Huo Wujiu would make good on his initial threat…or at least punish him severely.

But Huo Wujiu just casually planted a foot on the throne. “What are you so afraid of? He’s not dead.”

“The oversight was mine alone. I offer no excuses,” Lou Yue said, his voice low and heavy. “As you are now my superior, you are free to punish me as you see fit.”

“So, you understand that you’re at fault?” Huo Wujiu rested an arm on his knee.

Lou Yue couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but there was something peculiar about his tone—while not exactly friendly, it didn’t sound angry either. Rather, there was a performative air about it, like a hand poised to strike dropping down to pat him instead.

“My father reminded you countless times, did he not?” Huo Wujiu continued, his voice carrying the weight of years of military wisdom. “Even as a general, you can’t spend every waking moment thinking about battle. Whether you engage in the political intricacies of the court or not, you ought to understand at least some of it yourself. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Lou Yue mumbled in agreement, and Huo Wujiu leaned back on his throne.

"But…" Lou Yue stared at him, uncomprehending.

But why are you talking about this now? he wanted to ask.

Given Huo Wujiu's temper, Lou Yue came here fully expecting him to skip the small talk and have him dragged away for court-martial on the spot.

However, Huo Wujiu interrupted him before he could get the question out. Instead, he waved for a soldier to pour Lou Yue a cup of tea.

"There are no 'buts,'" he said. "The matter is closed. Don't bring it up again."

Lou Yue was flabbergasted. "But…why?"

Huo Wujiu just shot him a look. His hand unconsciously moved up to touch his own lips—a pose that coincidentally also concealed the slight smile at the corner of his mouth.

"Because you're my senior," he said.

Lou Yue stood dumbfounded.

"Sit," Huo Wujiu ordered. He cleared his throat and abruptly changed the subject. "How goes it in Yangzhou?"

Despite the immense confusion Lou Yue felt, he didn't dare dally in responding to official matters.

"Everything's settled. Fortunately, the commanders of those prefectures and counties are old acquaintances of mine. When news of the late emperor's death reached them, they knew they had no choice but to submit. I expect the remaining southern territories will follow suit swiftly enough. Their forces are scattered and lack leadership; even if they wish to resist, they can't."

Huo Wujiu gave a noncommittal hum. "By my reckoning, it won't be long before everything south of the Yangtze is firmly under control."

Lou Yue nodded, then frowned. "But have you considered what comes after?"

Huo Wujiu looked up. Lou Yue sat rigid, his expression taut with concern.

“A nation cannot go a day without a ruler. While our army is formidable enough to keep Southern Jing under control for now, this cannot last forever. With the civil officials held hostage, every government office in Lin’an and elsewhere is now powerless. You must reach out to Northern Liang and request that they send their officials and generals to help us reclaim this lost land.”

Huo Wujiu’s brow furrowed hard.

He fell silent, fingers drumming against his knee, as if lost in thought.

“Or…” Lou Yue hesitated, puzzled at his apparent indecision. “Do you…not wish to hand Southern Jing over to Northern Liang?”

Unbidden, a certain face popped up in his mind’s eye.

Wait a moment… Is this all because of the Prince of Jing?!

When Huo Wujiu had left to borrow troops, his only worry had been the prince. The day he returned to news of the prince’s capture, he seemed furious almost to the point of madness.

Could it be…?

Lou Yue’s jaw dropped. “You don’t mean to install a new monarch, do you?”

Huo Wujiu met his gaze but said nothing.

Lou Yue easily read the silent confirmation written in his eyes.

“You must think this through!” Lou Yue said.

Huo Wujiu was no ordinary man. Had he been just any general from Northern Liang, this choice might have been understandable. But he was the blood nephew of Northern Liang’s new emperor, the sole son of the late Marquis of Dingbei who had first raised the rebellion against Jing.

His ties to Northern Liang were unshakable; his very existence would become a dangerous variable for both nations. Even if the new Liang emperor tacitly allowed it, even if Jiang Suizhou agreed, the court and the general public’s censure would never cease. The two nations could not sustain such an awkward arrangement.

Huo Wujiu studied him for a long moment, then exhaled slowly.

“What if I said I don’t know?”

Lou Yue was speechless.

Huo Wujiu scowled at the desk as he rubbed his forehead.

“What a pain,” he muttered to himself.

Lou Yue couldn’t make sense of it.

To him, the decision couldn’t have been clearer. Destroying Southern Jing had been Huo Wujiu’s lifelong goal; he hadn’t even hesitated to kill its emperor.

The only complication was the Prince of Jing.

But fabricating a new identity for him would be child’s play for Huo Wujiu, would it not? Unless…the problem lay with Northern Liang?

Lou Yue didn’t know what to say, and he dared not speak regardless. He simply held his tongue and stood stock-still until finally, Huo Wujiu released a long sigh.

“Enough. Even if the surrounding prefectures have surrendered, stay vigilant. We cannot afford any further mistakes here.”

“Yes,” said Lou Yue gravely.

Huo Wujiu waved him out.

The moment Lou Yue left, the imperial study suddenly seemed oddly hollow. All of Jiang Shunheng’s belongings on the desk had been cleared away, yet the vast writing table was once again piled high with papers.

They were all letters and memorials sent by generals from inside and outside the city.

Huo Wujiu leaned back on the throne. He knew what those memorials contained without even needing to look.

Lou Yue was right, of course. They couldn’t continue to suppress the scholars of the court—such men valued morals even more than their lives, and they refused to be silenced. More importantly, the common people of Southern Jing couldn’t be left without governance for months on end.

He knew just how chaotic Southern Jing was.

But for the first time in his life, he found himself not wanting to let his mind dwell on Northern Liang.

He didn’t know how much his uncle was aware of what his cousin had done—or if it had been his uncle’s orders all along. When did it happen, anyway? How long had his sworn brother, the one who’d fought alongside him through life and death, plotted against him? They’d trusted each other with their lives, and yet somewhere along the way, Huo Yuyan had begun to view him with such wariness that he now plotted against him at every turn.

Huo Wujiu was barely past twenty. In his short life, he had only learned how to endure on the battlefield and kill his enemies—never how to deal with once-beloved kin stabbing him in the back.

Especially considering how his father, with his last breath, made Huo Wujiu promise to take care of them.

As he stared at the cluttered desk, a rare sense of confusion washed over him.

Such confusion was liable to create the illusion that one stood utterly alone against the world.

Strong, late morning sunlight streamed in through the nearby window. It was still early in the day.

But already, he missed Jiang Suizhou.

Chapter 97

HUO WUJIU RETURNED very late that night.

Regardless of whether he wanted to deal with them or not, the trivial matters his men brought to him still demanded his attention.

It was incredible how many problems Lin’an alone could produce in a single day, let alone all of Southern Jing. Although Huo Wujiu did his best to halfheartedly speed through these things, it still took far too long. By the time he finished clearing the pile of documents, the moon had already risen above the treetops.

When he stood up, his entire body felt as if it were about to fall apart.

He rarely felt this way. Even after days of relentless marching and riding, he had never experienced such exhaustion.

Who would’ve thought that sitting motionless for a day could also bring a man to his knees?

Annoyed, he remained standing for a moment to stretch his stiff shoulders and neck before finally turning to leave the imperial study.

The night outside was chilly.

The palanquin had long been waiting outside the hall. The palace grounds were vast, and every destination was far—certainly beyond the reach of a pampered nobleman relying solely on his legs.

But Huo Wujiu couldn’t stomach the idea of sitting down in yet another chair. If he let them carry him back, the jostling might just shake his aching bones apart.

Sparing the palanquin only a brief glance, he chose to walk at a swift pace back to his quarters.

The attendants trailing behind him struggled to keep up, soon breaking into a jog. By the time Huo Wujiu finally reached the palace courtyard where he resided, they were panting slightly from the exertion.

Huo Wujiu marched straight to Jiang Suizhou's door and paused but did not enter.

"General?" Wei Kai inquired, quickly stepping forward from behind.

Huo Wujiu frowned. "What time is it?"

"It's nearly the third watch—just half an hour left."

Huo Wujiu clicked his tongue in annoyance and turned to leave.

"Wait, where are you going, General?" Wei Kai asked as he hurried after him.

Huo Wujiu didn't look back. "To sleep."

His voice carried a hint of gnashing teeth.

Wei Kai let out a small but dramatic gasp. "But didn't you tell His Highness the Prince of Jing that you'd visit him tonight?"

Huo Wujiu glowered at him. *This brat really knows how to twist the knife.*

Of course he wanted to see Jiang Suizhou! That thought was what kept him sane as he spent an entire day cooped up in the imperial study, his head spinning from the words contained within the endless pile of memorials. It was slow, grinding work that left his back stiff and sore. He'd endured it all just so he could see Jiang Suizhou a little sooner.

But…it was too late at night for that now—it was close to midnight. He couldn't selfishly disturb Jiang Suizhou's rest.

His feeble body was even weaker than usual at the moment. The lingering illness from before hadn't even fully cleared before he'd wound up detained, tortured, and nearly killed. Just thinking about the daily suffering Jiang Suizhou had endured made Huo Wujiu restless.

No, he'd rather toss and turn all night than risk waking Jiang Suizhou.

Annoyed by Wei Kai's tactless remark, Huo Wujiu turned around to berate him—but before he could, the door opened. Meng Qianshan stepped out, carrying a basin in his arms, ready to do some work outside.

He seemed startled to find Huo Wujiu standing at the foot of the steps.

“General Huo?” he called out. “Aren’t you coming in?”

Huo Wujiu lifted his head and gazed grimly up at Meng Qianshan.

“No, I won’t. Let your prince rest well.”

“But His Highness isn’t asleep yet,” Meng Qianshan said, puzzled. “He’s been waiting for you!”

Wei Kai turned to ensure his general heard the good news, but before he could say a single word, a gust of wind blew past him, cool and sharp.

Blinking in surprise, he looked up to see his general already striding calmly into the hall. His posture was perfect, his steps steady. He exuded an austere air of authority and composure.

If only he hadn’t broken into a near-run to hurtle up the stairs, perhaps the illusion might have been more convincing.

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Huo Wujiu walked quickly through the outer hall and into the inner chamber, where he saw Jiang Suizhou leaning languidly against the pillows.

He was ostensibly reading the book he held loosely in one hand, but it had already tilted to one side as he stifled yawn after yawn. Clearly, the drowsiness was about to overtake him.

Huo Wujiu marched over and snatched the book from his grip.

“You can barely keep your eyes open, and you’re still trying to read?” he scolded lightly. Though his tone carried a sort of feigned displeasure, the tenderness underlying it was obvious.

Startled by the sudden disappearance of his book, Jiang Suizhou looked up and smiled faintly when he saw Huo Wujiu standing there. He still carried the chill of the night air on him.

“No, not exactly,” Jiang Suizhou answered. “But didn’t you say this morning that you’d come back tonight?”

Slowly, he reached out to take the book back from Huo Wujiu, closing it properly and setting it aside before continuing.

“Why are you back so late? Did you just now finish your work?”

He sounded very tired, to the point of being slightly hoarse. It softened all the edges of his voice and made his tone gentler than usual.

Bathed in the warm and cozy glow of the candlelight, these simple words stirred another strange, unfamiliar feeling in Huo Wujiu’s chest. He had never experienced anything like it, even after so many years of campaigning, and it instantly melted away all of his exhaustion and pent-up frustration.

Until now, he had never known what it was like to have someone waiting for him to return home.

He sat down at the edge of the bed and reached for Jiang Suizhou’s hand.

“There was a lot to deal with, and it took longer than I expected,” he explained, rubbing Jiang Suizhou’s hand gently. “I only said I’d come. I never said you had to stay awake. What was the point in waiting for me?”

His tone was serious, but Jiang Suizhou could hear the contradiction in his words.

Instead of answering, Jiang Suizhou leaned against the bed and laughed, a soft glimmer of amusement dancing in his eyes as they rested on Huo Wujiu.

It made Huo Wujiu’s heart pound wildly.

Gritting his teeth, he leaned in and—now familiar with the act after the first few attempts—lightly nipped at Jiang Suizhou’s lips.

“What’s so funny?” he murmured.

Jiang Suizhou tried to dodge, but Huo Wujiu followed in hot pursuit. Suddenly, what should have been a simple play bite escalated into a deeper entanglement of lips.

Lacking in experience, Huo Wujiu relied solely on instinct, which made his movements clumsy and unrestrained. Within moments, Jiang Suizhou was breathless and had to shift him away.

Knowing he was still injured, Huo Wujiu didn’t dare push his limits. He soon yielded to Jiang Suizhou’s light shoves.

While Jiang Suizhou caught his breath, Huo Wujiu sat there staring at him with a smug, triumphant grin.

Good thing this man doesn't have a tail, or he'd be wagging it so hard it might fall off, Jiang Suizhou thought, shooting him a glance.

Still, he could see that Huo Wujiu's expression now was completely different compared to when he'd first entered the room.

It wasn't hard to figure out the reason for that dramatic shift.

Noticing his gaze, Huo Wujiu seized the opportunity to lean in for another attack.

How quickly a single taste had bloomed into addiction.

Already exhausted from the last, Jiang Suizhou quickly relented and let himself be kissed into a daze once more. By the end of it, he was slumped against Huo Wujiu's shoulder, firmly enveloped in his embrace.

"No more mischief," Jiang Suizhou chided breathlessly.

Huo Wujiu gave a solemn hum of agreement—only to dip his head and press another fleeting kiss to Jiang Suizhou's lips before the sound of his admonishment had even faded.

Utterly brazen, as if he knew he could get away with anything.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't be bothered to argue and simply let him hold on.

After a moment, he asked, "Tell me, were the matters you handled today particularly troublesome?"

Huo Wujiu paused.

Of course they were troublesome—most of them involved dealing with civil officials, with whom Huo Wujiu had little experience. Such men weren't prisoners of war and couldn't simply be executed. They could prove useful later.

On the other hand, they struggled to adapt to dynastic upheaval. These men were scholars who refused to be silenced as long as they lived. In other words, they were willing to sacrifice themselves for their morals.

In the span of a single day, Huo Wujiu had received three different letters, all urgently sent from the home of the Grand Master of Ceremonies.

Apparently, when Minister Qi Min heard of the emperor’s assassination, he tried to throw himself upon the garrison’s swords, demanding that the civil and military officials be given a swift end. He assured Huo Wujiu that he could stab or flay them if he wished, but they refused to be kept alive to be humiliated.

Naturally, the entire thing gave Huo Wujiu a headache.

But right now, he had Jiang Suizhou in his arms, separated only by a few thin layers of fabric.

The warmth of his body seeped into Huo Wujiu's own with the steady rise and fall of Jiang Suizhou's chest. It made all those messy affairs seem less daunting—and certainly not worth troubling Jiang Suizhou over.

"Just a bit tedious," he said. "Nothing serious."

Jiang Suizhou knew he was just being stubborn. He tried to lift his head to look at him, but Huo Wujiu seemed to sense his intentions and pressed him firmly back into his embrace.

"What, you don't trust me?" Huo Wujiu asked, holding him tightly.

"Of course I do," Jiang Suizhou answered. "It's just that I know how tricky these things can be, and you're from Northern Liang, after all…"

When Huo Wujiu heard this, alarm flooded him. This was almost certainly Jiang Suizhou's way of offering to step in and help.

But his injuries had barely begun to heal! There was absolutely no way Huo Wujiu would allow him to concern himself with these trivial matters.

"It'll be fine," he said quickly. "So what if they're former Southern Jing officials? They're still just a bunch of scholars. The only reason I'm keeping them alive is because I know how to deal with them."

"You can't just kill people recklessly," Jiang Suizhou countered.

Huo Wujiu clicked his tongue.

"Is that how you see me?" he asked, lowering his gaze.

Jiang Suizhou chuckled softly.

"Of course not," he said. "It's just that those scholars can be harsh when provoked. I'm afraid you might lose your temper with them."

Huo Wujiu gave his cheek a light pinch.

"Rest assured, I wouldn't go so far as to kill them," he said. "Because how would I ever explain myself to you when I get back?"

As he spoke, he lowered his head and brushed his lips lightly against the crest of Jiang Suizhou's forehead.

"Anyway, you don't need to worry about anything besides your recovery," he said. "I conquered the city, after all. Do you really think I can't govern it? And if I can't…well, how hard could it be to conquer it again?"

Recognizing his attempt at a lighthearted joke, Jiang Suizhou obliged with a laugh.

"All right, all right, we all know you're good at fighting," he said.

They chatted idly, their words weaving back and forth as the night deepened. The medicine made Jiang Suizhou drowsy, and as they talked, he gradually grew sleepier.

Huo Wujiu noticed immediately, but he didn't mention it. He just softened his voice bit by bit until the conversation wound down into the hum of slow, even breathing.

Carefully, he looked down to find Jiang Suizhou sound asleep in his arms.

A wave of emotion washed over him at the realization, leaving behind something soft and warm and tender that vibrated relentlessly inside his chest, utterly overwhelming.

This was the most beautiful person he had ever seen in his twenty-some years of life. Huo Wujiu had always been proud and aloof, yet for the first time, he felt the urge to claim someone as his own. He'd spent so long hesitating, afraid to take that step.

And then all his wildest dreams suddenly came true.

Now that he had finally pulled this person into his arms, Huo Wujiu had no intention of letting him go.

He couldn't bear to see any of Jiang Suizhou's problems cause him further suffering. He refused to allow it, and it didn't matter whether dealing with those things naturally fell within Huo Wujiu's strengths or weaknesses.

He would shield him from everything.

Chapter 98

JIANG SUIZHOU ACUTELY SENSED how exhausted Huo Wujiu had been the past few days.

Of course, Huo Wujiu never spoke of it. Every day, after handling court affairs, he would come to spend time with Jiang Suizhou as usual. He insisted on personally checking his recovery and then staying until Jiang Suizhou fell asleep.

His expression remained unchanged, but the shadows under his eyes darkened by the day.

Each time Jiang Suizhou tried to ask, Huo Wujiu would brush off his concerns and insist everything was fine. In the end, Jiang Suizhou could do nothing but let it go.

Several days passed in this manner.

Jiang Suizhou's recovery proceeded without issue. His wounds scabbed over and became less painful. Slowly but surely, he even regained the strength to walk on his own. Li Changning, drawing upon his exceptional skill, took note of his progress and adjusted his treatment—adding several herbs that would replenish his qi and blood to gently nurture his foundation.

Yet Huo Wujiu remained uneasy.

Whenever he saw Jiang Suizhou up and moving about the room, he would tense up as if facing a dire threat. Before long, he'd insist on helping him back to bed.

Wei Kai found it almost unbearable to watch.

His general had always been the type to push through any injury or hardship without complaint, no matter how severe. He held himself to that standard and expected the same from his subordinates. Never had they seen him so cautious and meticulous.

Truly, love was the one thing that could utterly transform a person's temperament.

Though Jiang Suizhou had said little these past few days, he had been quietly observing Huo Wujiu's condition.

He knew Huo Wujiu was stubborn, proud, and extraordinarily resilient—even when pushed to his limits, he would never voluntarily show weakness. Moreover, with Jiang Suizhou injured, Huo Wujiu had become excessively careful around him, naturally burying his own struggles even deeper.

But Jiang Suizhou had no intention of letting this continue.

The reason Huo Wujiu forced himself to endure for so long was because he truly had no one to rely on. The world saw him as an indomitable god of war, after all. Everyone leaned on him, so he had no choice but to shoulder everything alone.

But things were different now. It wouldn't be that way anymore.

One morning, after Huo Wujiu left, Jiang Suizhou decided that it was time to do something he'd been planning for a while.

Feeling particularly refreshed and lighter on his feet after taking his medicine, he got out of bed to take a short walk outside the palace hall.

The residence he now occupied was located behind the former emperor's bedchamber—originally meant for a favored consort, it had long sat vacant because the previous ruler hadn't had any particular preference.

The courtyard scenery was exquisite. Meng Qianshan, following beside him, cheerfully informed him that General Huo was currently staying in a side hall so he could keep him company every day.

His words were sweet, his expression bright. Jiang Suizhou glanced at him with a faint smile but said nothing.

Lifting his gaze, he took in the meticulously crafted landscape of the palace grounds, where every step revealed a new vista, lending vitality to the gilded towers and pavilions.

While the scenery was lovely, that wasn't the purpose of this excursion. The real purpose was to gauge his own recovery.

He simply wanted to test how far he could walk in his current state, and the results satisfied him.

After a brief rest, he returned to his chambers and waited until nightfall. Huo Wujiu always visited around the same time each night.

But by late evening, Huo Wujiu still hadn't returned. His absence today likely meant he had encountered some trouble.

For a while, Jiang Suizhou sat quietly. Then, as if reaching a decision, he rose from the bed.

Seeing this, Meng Qianshan hurried forward. "Your Highness?"

"Help me dress and prepare a palanquin. I'm going out," Jiang Suizhou said calmly.

"But Your Highness," Meng Qianshan protested immediately, "the night is damp and cold, and your injuries aren't fully healed—"

"Then fetch me a heavier cloak," Jiang Suizhou said.

Meng Qianshan hesitated. "But—"

Jiang Suizhou looked at him. "What, will you no longer obey my orders?"

Meng Qianshan wrung his hands, uneasy.

"Huo Wujiu gave you instructions, didn't he?" Jiang Suizhou prodded. "Just do as I say. He won't do anything to you."

At that point, Meng Qianshan knew he had no choice. In the face of Jiang Suizhou's insurmountable resolve, he clenched his jaw and reluctantly obeyed.

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Huo Wujiu was about to explode from exasperation.

The Pang faction's officials, who'd originally been so difficult to handle, had now become surprisingly docile. They were opportunists at heart—they scattered when benefits dried up and abandoned those who lost power. When Pang Shao held authority, they'd flocked to his side; now that Huo Wujiu was unquestionably in control, suddenly they were on their best behavior and didn't cause him any trouble.

But the real headaches were the self-righteous, pedantic scholars.

After the Jing dynasty fell, these men spent their days clamoring for death and hurling abuse at the garrison troops—and that was the mildest of their antics. Yet Huo Wujiu couldn't simply let them die. If too many court officials perished, the people would panic.

Whether they lived or died, those men remained a thorn in his side.

And yet, all that would have been manageable on its own. After several days of this, Huo Wujiu had grown more adept at handling all of the various court officials.

But today, what truly grated on his nerves was his uncle, the emperor of Northern Liang.

The upheaval in Southern Jing didn't escape Northern Liang's notice. In fact, the Zhaoyuan Emperor sent Huo Wujiu a letter concerning these recent events, which arrived earlier that very day.

The imperial seal stamped on it was unmistakably genuine.

He had just tossed the letter haphazardly onto the desk when another report came in and stole his attention. Still stewing in irritation over the first issue, he was not particularly well-equipped at the moment to deal with the second.

Apparently, Minister Qi Min had once again attempted suicide. Fortunately, someone stopped him in time, and he survived with minor injuries.

This news was like a spark landing on dry tinder.

"Can't you even keep watch over one feeble old man?!" Huo Wujiu snapped. "How is he running circles around you?"

The messenger hastily explained that Minister Qi was emotionally unstable and refused to communicate in the slightest with anyone from Northern Liang, leaving them at a loss.

"I refuse to believe that if you tied his hands and feet, gagged him, and force-fed him three meals a day, he'd still find a way to die," Huo Wujiu said through clenched teeth, his voice icy enough to freeze blood.

The messenger didn’t dare lift his head, and he could only stammer out his agreement, trembling as he knelt before General Huo in an attempt to calm his anger.

“If you understand, then get out!”

Huo Wujiu punctuated the command by flinging the memorial to the floor.

The man instantly scrambled to comply, fearing that he might genuinely meet his fate should he waste another moment of the general’s time on this matter.

But just as he began to make a hasty retreat, a cool, composed voice interjected.

“Wait.”

Everyone in the imperial study froze in shock.

Huo Wujiu looked up to see Jiang Suizhou standing beside the screen at the rear of the study. His complexion was still somewhat pale, his face drawn. He wore a heavy black cloak with an additional outer robe draped over it—a layered ensemble more suited to autumn than summer.

The soldier kneeling on the ground broke out in a cold sweat.

Who in the world had the audacity to interrupt the general in the middle of an outburst?

Since the old marquis’s passing, there hadn’t been a single person in the entire realm bold enough to do such a thing.

The soldier remained frozen in place, unsure whose authority was greater.

Then came a shuffling sound from the imperial desk—the general had risen to his feet.

But it wasn’t to erupt in anger at this interloper. Instead, he hurried over to the man’s side and reached out to steady him.

“What are you doing here?” His voice carried a note of alarm and absolutely none of the thunderous rage from moments ago.

“If I hadn’t come, I would never have heard you losing your temper like that.”

The man’s tone was as unhurried as ever, though his breath was slightly weak from poor health, making his voice remarkably clear and gentle.

“This is nothing, just a trivial matter,” the general said hastily. “But how could you travel all this way? The night is so cold; what was Meng Qianshan thinking?”

“Oh?” The man chuckled softly. “Are you taking it upon yourself to discipline my men as well?”

This seemed to leave General Huo uncharacteristically tongue-tied.

The soldier kneeling before the desk grew even more desperate to catch a glimpse of this extraordinary figure.

Who in the world possessed such divine power to effortlessly defuse their general’s wrath? Not even the gods could tame his fury.

But he didn’t dare look up. He just listened attentively as the general guided the man to the throne to take a seat. The general himself stood to the side.

Then the unknown man spoke again, this time to the soldier.

“Rise and speak,” he said.

Hesitant, the soldier slowly lifted his head in caution—prompting the general to snap impatiently, “Are you deaf?!”

The soldier scrambled to his feet at once.

“What news did you bring?” the man on the throne asked.

Now standing upright, the soldier finally got a clear look at the speaker.

This stranger was a handsome young man draped in sumptuous dark robes that lent him an air of noble arrogance. He was almost unnervingly beautiful, with delicate features that bordered on ethereal. Though he was clearly still recovering from an illness, his bearing was dignified, and he wore a serene expression.

The soldier’s courage bolstered a little.

“To answer the young lord’s question, it concerns the Grand Master of Ceremonies’ residence,” he said.

“What about it?” the young lord asked.

“The minister…has been in low spirits these past few days. He’s repeatedly attempted suicide,” the soldier explained.

The young lord glanced up at General Huo. “I don’t recall Minister Qi being this sort of person,” he said. “What exactly have you been doing these past few days?”

General Huo lowered his gaze to meet his eyes.

The general was tall and imposing, clad in military attire that should have made him appear domineering and aloof. Yet now, with his head slightly bowed, though his expression remained unchanged, there was an undeniable air of submission about him—like a wild wolf acknowledging its master.

“I…didn’t do much,” the general muttered. His tone was defiant but still tinged with guilt. “I haven’t decided how to deal with them yet, so I’ve just been keeping them confined to their residences.”

The young lord let out a soft, exasperated laugh.

“So you’re treating them like prisoners of war?” he said. “If you intended to kill them, this approach would be understandable. But since you aren’t, you should treat them with courtesy. At least *try* to placate their grievances.”

The soldier scratched his head in bewilderment.

Placating grievances was entirely outside their realm of expertise.

Huo Wujiu and his subordinates had always been border garrison forces. It was standard procedure to execute local officials after any victory. Surely, allowing them to live was already an extraordinary act of leniency.

They’d already lost—why bother soothing their feelings?

The young lord pulled over a sheet of paper and began writing.

Moments later, he set down the brush, lifted the paper to review it, then gently blew on the ink to dry it.

“I imagine that no matter what you do now, they won’t be inclined to listen,” the young lord said. “In that case, I must trouble you to deliver this letter to Minister Qi on my behalf. You needn’t say anything to him, as my

signature is already on it. After this, the matter should resolve without issue.”

By the time he finished speaking, the ink had dried completely. He folded the paper and placed it on the desk.

The soldier hurried forward to accept it, looking up just as the young lord offered him a faint smile.

“Go on,” he said.

The soldier bowed and hastily withdrew.

As he was about to exit the imperial study, the soldier stole a glance back and saw the young lord looking up, speaking softly to General Huo. The general leaned one hand on the armrest of the throne, obediently lowering his head to listen—no trace of his earlier ferocity remained.

The scene appeared almost tranquil beneath the bright light of the study.

Though the soldier was uneducated, a common saying suddenly popped into his mind:

Everything has its vanquisher.

Chapter 99

HUO WUJIU FELT GUILTY.

He had no idea why he felt guilty. He just knew that as he gazed down at Jiang Suizhou sitting there, solemn and proper, something about looking down at his profile filled his heart with unease.

…After all, Jiang Suizhou had witnessed him losing his temper. And from the looks of it, it'd been a particularly unreasonable outburst.

He never thought he'd fear something like this.

Normally, unless absolutely necessary, he acted as he pleased. Soldiers who fought on the battlefield were used to rolling in the mud; dignity was the least of their concerns, let alone occasional fits of temper. Those were utterly commonplace.

But having Jiang Suizhou witness this side of him actually filled him with fear.

Unconsciously, he had developed the mentality of a peacock in courtship—fanning out his magnificent tail feathers before his beloved, hiding the dull plumage behind, lest he appear even slightly unattractive.

Huo Wujiu stood there, unsettled.

Jiang Suizhou leisurely picked up a few memorials from the desk, skimmed through them, then set them back down.

He looked up at Huo Wujiu.

"Is this what you've been calling 'nothing' every day?" Jiang Suizhou asked.

Huo Wujiu froze, snapping out of his earlier frustration.

He opened his mouth but found himself momentarily speechless.

"…It's really nothing serious," he muttered eventually.

Jiang Suizhou tapped his fingers on the documents.

“Another few days of secrecy, and we’ll start seeing deaths roll in,” he said. “Then everyone across the land will be talking about how the villainous Huo Wujiu mistreated the officials from the former dynasty and slaughtered loyal subjects. Who’s going to listen to your justifications then?”

Huo Wujiu, however, remained indifferent. “Let them say what they want. They can write whatever they please in the history books.”

“That’s unacceptable!” Jiang Suizhou blurted out. “How can we let historians slander you like that for future generations to see?”

His tone was startlingly earnest.

Huo Wujiu looked at him and caught a flicker of panic in Jiang Suizhou’s upturned gaze.

“I mean…you shouldn’t neglect your reputation,” he said, attempting to explain.

Huo Wujiu burst out laughing.

His Highness the Prince of Jing truly couldn’t lie. This had nothing to do with the morality of maintaining one’s reputation—it was the ill-famed prince himself who cared deeply about Huo Wujiu’s standing.

Feeling unfairly favored, Huo Wujiu found his courage surging. He stepped forward and squeezed onto the throne beside Jiang Suizhou.

While the seat was spacious enough to accommodate both of them, it was a tight fit. They were pressed so close together that Huo Wujiu easily encircled Jiang Suizhou in a one-armed embrace.

Huo Wujiu exhaled slowly, resting his chin on Jiang Suizhou’s shoulder. When he spoke again, his voice carried a hint of reluctant vulnerability.

“I didn’t want you to worry about these things,” he said. “But…I really don’t know how to handle this.”

“Even if you hide it from me, I can still tell,” Jiang Suizhou said gently.

“But you’re still recovering,” Huo Wujiu argued.

“Didn’t I go out today?”

“Which is why Meng Qianshan deserves a beating.” Huo Wujiu snarled.

“You’re the one who deserves a beating,” Jiang Suizhou retorted.

With that, he reached over and mercilessly pinched him on the arm. Unfortunately, Huo Wujiu’s well-muscled forearm was rock solid and utterly unpinchable. The harder he tried, the more his own fingers ached.

Giving up, he sheepishly withdrew his hand, eliciting a muffled laugh from Huo Wujiu.

Jiang Suizhou’s ears reddened, but he very purposefully focused on the desk instead. He began calmly organizing the scattered memorials on the desk and flipping through them one by one.

“Anyway, since I’ve recovered quite a bit, I can help you with these matters,” Jiang Suizhou said.

This wasn’t an empty offer—his assistance was invaluable to Huo Wujiu, a general who knew only warfare and brute force. As a history professor who’d traveled a thousand years into the past, Jiang Suizhou had an intimate understanding of the officials in Southern Jing’s court.

He knew their temperaments, who could be trusted, and who was trouble.

Huo Wujiu, however, turned him down.

“You’re still not fully healed. You shouldn’t be pushing yourself,” he said.

Jiang Suizhou cast him a cool glance.

Huo Wujiu frowned, clicking his tongue in displeasure, but said nothing more.

A moment later, as if venting his frustration, he leaned in and kissed Jiang Suizhou hard on the lips.

“Fine. You can help out as needed, but only if you let me accompany you,” he declared.

Jiang Suizhou didn’t refuse.

Only then did Huo Wujiu relent, pushing the stack of documents toward Jiang Suizhou.

But elsewhere, out of Jiang Suizhou’s sight, his hand discreetly tucked away the Zhaoyuan Emperor’s personal letter.

The candlelight burned steadily, crackling with sparks from time to time. Jiang Suizhou’s focus was absolute as he reviewed the pile of memorials while Huo Wujiu sat quietly beside him, watching in silence.

Over the past few days, Huo Wujiu had developed a deep loathing for the imperial study. He had no real choice in the matter, so he merely endured it…until now.

Now, the study was bright and tranquil. Graced with the miraculous presence of one particularly wonderful man, it instantly became the best place in the world.

For a long time, he just gazed steadily at Jiang Suizhou, who remained wholly absorbed in the documents before him.

When Jiang Suizhou finally set aside the last memorial, he looked up at Huo Wujiu.

“Is there anything else apart from these?” he asked.

Huo Wujiu had yet to pull himself out of his daze. A second or two passed before he said, “What?”

Jiang Suizhou repeated his words patiently.

Though Huo Wujiu maintained his neutral expression, he couldn’t suppress a slight twitch of his brow.

“Why do you ask?” he parried.

Jiang Suizhou sighed.

“These matters alone couldn’t have made you lose your temper,” he said.

Huo Wujiu didn’t know how Jiang Suizhou could read him so well. While it pleased him, it was also a bit frustrating when he wanted to keep something hidden—just a tiny bit, of course.

Jiang Suizhou took his silence as tacit admission.

Still, Huo Wujiu stubbornly refused to speak.

Jiang Suizhou's expression darkened. He had been restraining himself for quite a few days, but now, his patience had worn impossibly thin.

The palace was in chaos, and the world along with it, yet Huo Wujiu was hiding from him everything he possibly could. He shielded him as if under impenetrable wings.

Jiang Suizhou understood Huo Wujiu's intentions, but he didn't want this.

As a historian, he knew the storm that came with dynastic change. It wasn't a burden one person could bear alone, and he refused to let Huo Wujiu shoulder it by himself.

He could stand shoulder to shoulder with Huo Wujiu, yet Huo Wujiu wouldn't allow it.

In truth, Jiang Suizhou had been planning this excursion for a while. He'd waited until he'd recovered enough to move about, then seized the chance to catch Huo Wujiu red-handed. He knew he had to force him into a situation in which he couldn't deny the evidence.

But even now, he insisted on keeping secrets.

Jiang Suizhou pressed his lips together, staring silently at Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu immediately sensed something was wrong.

"What's the matter?"

He reached out to touch Jiang Suizhou, who instantly swatted his hand away.

The gesture wasn't forceful, but it was more than Huo Wujiu could bear.

"Huo Wujiu." Jiang Suizhou's voice was strained. "If you love me, you should be honest with me."

Panic flooded Huo Wujiu's thoughts.

"No! I didn't mean to deceive you. It's just that these matters…" He trailed off.

These matters were too wretched, too tangled—he didn't understand them himself, had no solutions, and couldn't bear to trouble Jiang Suizhou

with them.

He just…couldn’t. Jiang Suizhou shouldn’t have to think about these things.

“What ‘matters’?” Jiang Suizhou prompted.

His voice was so cold it made Huo Wujiu’s chest ache.

Gritting his teeth, Huo Wujiu grabbed the letter hidden in the desk’s crevice and thrust it into Jiang Suizhou’s hand like a man facing execution.

“It’s nothing serious,” he muttered stubbornly.

Jiang Suizhou lowered his gaze and unfolded the letter.

It was written in vermilion ink, stamped unmistakably with the Zhaoyuan Emperor’s imperial seal.

The letter was heartfelt, overflowing with concern and joy. The emperor expressed delight that Huo Wujiu’s legs were healed and his overall health restored, yet he didn’t forget to scold him for not informing him sooner or returning to court earlier. The Zhaoyuan Emperor seemed beyond pleased to know that Huo Wujiu was indeed the mastermind behind Southern Jing’s fall and intended to reward him. He even asked about Huo Wujiu’s plans for governance.

Despite the Zhaoyuan Emperor’s failing health, his writing was incredibly verbose. His characters grew unsteady toward the end, as if he could barely hold the brush, yet he kept writing.

Jiang Suizhou finished reading in silence and set it aside.

“This letter is what upset you, isn’t it?” he asked.

Huo Wujiu offered only a vague grunt of affirmation, evasive as ever. At this point, though, it was like burying his head in the sand.

He reached to take the letter back, but Jiang Suizhou snatched it away and left Huo Wujiu grasping at air.

“You knew you’d have to face this eventually,” Jiang Suizhou said. “That’s why you’ve stationed heavy troops in Southern Jing but taken no further action, is it not?”

Huo Wujiu said nothing.

Jiang Suizhou knew this was an excruciating dilemma for him.

After a moment of silence, he sighed softly and placed his hand over Huo Wujiu's.

"You noticed it in the letter too, didn't you?" he asked.

Huo Wujiu didn't speak, only gripping Jiang Suizhou's hand in return.

Jiang Suizhou silently tightened his hold.

He had harbored suspicions for some time, and today's letter confirmed them.

If the Zhaoyuan Emperor and Huo Yuyan were truly of one mind regarding the throne and succession, then Huo Yuyan wouldn't have needed to act so desperately. It was incredibly risky for him to secretly collude with enemy ministers, all to eliminate Huo Wujiu.

Huo Yuyan wouldn't have had to go to such lengths if he had the support of the emperor.

Now it seemed almost certain that the Zhaoyuan Emperor was unaware of Huo Yuyan's schemes.

Huo Wujiu finally spoke through clenched teeth, his voice low.

"Why didn't they at least coordinate properly?" he said. "They should just tell me whether or not they want me dead!"

His tone was fierce, but Jiang Suizhou heard the pain beneath it.

Huo Yuyan and the Zhaoyuan Emperor were father and son, bound by blood. If both had ruthlessly targeted him, Huo Wujiu could have marched north without hesitation and turned against them. But the Zhaoyuan Emperor remained a loving uncle in his eyes.

He couldn't bring himself to strike and now found himself trapped in this impossible position.

Jiang Suizhou gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

"I might have a solution," he said. "Regardless of circumstances, it could resolve our current predicament."

Huo Wujiu looked up at him. "What solution?"

Jiang Suizhou held his gaze for a long moment before abruptly issuing an ultimatum.

“I’ll tell you,” he said, his eyes narrowing slightly, “but you must promise never to hide anything from me again.”

Huo Wujiu lowered his head, silent.

But wasn’t this what it meant to love someone? All he wanted to do was give his beloved the best and shield him from the worst.

He didn’t know how to do this properly. But…he knew in his heart that if these types of unpleasant matters reared their ugly heads again, his choice would be the same.

“I understand your intentions, but I love you just as much. You can’t deny me the right to share your burdens,” Jiang Suizhou implored.

Huo Wujiu’s heart trembled. He stared at Jiang Suizhou, unblinking.

He had never once in his life believed he needed protection, let alone mutual reliance. The world had only ever taught him lessons in independence and personal resilience until it set him on the path that led to Jiang Suizhou.

This was a person who would willingly weather any storm alongside him.

Huo Wujiu’s heart started pounding fiercely, and a scorching heat built up in his chest. As it began to overflow through every vein, he clenched his hand and parted his lips to speak…

Jiang Suizhou preemptively cut in before he could say a word.

“Besides, you’re still my concubine, remember? You must obey me in all things, so no more lies.”

Jiang Suizhou looked up just in time to register a shift in Huo Wujiu’s expression.

The next instant, the world spun.

Jiang Suizhou’s vision blurred as a sharp pain flared along his lower back. Blinking, he realized he had been quite unceremoniously hoisted up and pinned firmly against the imperial desk.

“Who are you calling a concubine?”

Huo Wujiu loomed menacingly over him with a sharp, predatory gaze.

Chapter 100

A LITTLE GASP ESCAPED Jiang Suizhou's lips as he attempted to push Huo Wujiu away.

"Stop fooling around!" he protested, to no avail.

"I asked you a question," Huo Wujiu growled, pressing him harder against the desk. "Who's a concubine?"

Somehow this skittish little rabbit had mastered the art of rubbing salt in wounds. Just when Huo Wujiu was getting sentimental, he'd charged in with a bucket of cold water.

Unfortunately, Huo Wujiu's outrage only ended up amusing Jiang Suizhou.

"You, of course," he said solemnly. "When we were married, they had to carry you through the side gate of my manor. They didn't even let you through the main entrance. Have you already forgotten? It's only been a couple of months."

Huo Wujiu lunged to bite him, but Jiang Suizhou quickly dodged. He struck again, their breaths intermingling and gradually growing heavier, hotter.

The way Huo Wujiu continued to press himself so intimately against Jiang Suizhou's body was certainly only adding fuel to the fire.

And such proximity inevitably stoked reactions best left unspoken.

But Jiang Suizhou noticed immediately and looked up to see Huo Wujiu's dark eyes half lidded, burning with the same desire he felt building within himself.

Briefly, Jiang Suizhou's eyes darted behind Huo Wujiu to the solemn and dignified imperial study beyond, where coiling dragons on golden pillars looked down upon this display with austere disapproval.

Suddenly panicky, Jiang Suizhou shoved at Huo Wujiu again, but it was impossible to dislodge him unless he voluntarily relented.

The more Jiang Suizhou pushed, the tighter Huo Wujiu pressed, until his back met the piled documents on the desk.

Finally, with a ragged exhale, Huo Wujiu released him despite the arousal that still radiated like heat from his gaze.

At that point, Huo Wujiu realized his aggressive advances had ended up tormenting himself more than Jiang Suizhou. After all, Jiang Suizhou's injuries were still healing. He wouldn't be able to withstand any kind of strenuous activity.

For now, the fire he'd recklessly ignited had to be forcibly smothered by no one but himself.

Annoyed yet unrepentant, Huo Wujiu leaned in and bit down on Jiang Suizhou's ear. What might have otherwise been an intimidating gesture dissolved into a hot, teasing graze that sent shivers down Jiang Suizhou's spine.

"Why won't you let this humble servant attend to his prince properly?" Huo Wujiu muttered against his ear. "Didn't you just tell me I'm your concubine?"

…This man knew how to hold a grudge.

Jiang Suizhou shoved his shoulder, and Huo Wujiu reluctantly released him.

"Fine, you're not a concubine," Jiang Suizhou conceded, humoring him. "You're my principal wife—the princess consort. Happy now?"

Huo Wujiu sat back on the throne, dragging Jiang Suizhou into his lap. Still displeased but magnanimous, he let it go.

"That's more like it," he sniffed, with the gravity of a general strategizing in his tent.

Jiang Suizhou failed to stifle a laugh.

"But in that case, I'll have you know I won't accept a perfunctory wedding," Huo Wujiu continued very seriously. "All of the ceremonies[6] must be completed—the Three Letters and Six Etiquettes, the investiture edict, everything."

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Even the most imperious man in the world had a weakness that compelled him to make unexpected compromises.

Though still reluctant to let Jiang Suizhou leave their quarters, Huo Wujiu finally realized that he couldn't stop him. After just a day or two of resistance, he capitulated.

With his newfound freedom, Jiang Suizhou's first act was to go to the imperial study and draft a letter to the Zhaoyuan Emperor with Huo Wujiu.

Even if his suspicions were likely correct, caution remained paramount. He had Huo Wujiu carefully phrase the letter, detailing Southern Jing's current situation and explaining how the sudden military campaign had thrown the southern territories into chaos. Thus, Huo Wujiu intended to remain in Southern Jing to stabilize the region south of the Yangtze before returning to court.

They also noted that Southern Jing's officials couldn't be fully trusted, and Huo Wujiu urgently requested that experienced administrators be dispatched to aid him. Jiang Suizhou listed his top candidates in the Northern Liang court—all of them among the Huo faction's core loyalists.

Jiang Suizhou compiled the list with startling fluency, ranging from the old marquis's former advisors to regional officials who'd pledged allegiance to Huo Wujiu before the Zhaoyuan Emperor's ascension, even including several ministers whose names Huo Wujiu barely recalled. Huo Wujiu stared in amazement.

"How do you know all this?" Huo Wujiu asked, genuinely astonished.

Jiang Suizhou gave him an unreadable glance.

Of course he knew. And not just about their current allegiances, but everything about them, from how many children they'd have to when they'd die to what they'd one day accomplish.

After he finalized the list and verified there were trustworthy figures who still maintained influence in Northern Liang, he handed it to Huo Wujiu to transcribe.

“This should reveal your uncle’s intentions,” Jiang Suizhou said. “It’s a move that leaves us room to maneuver regardless of the response.”

When this list reached the Zhaoyuan Emperor’s desk, Huo Wujiu’s intentions would be laid bare—having conquered the south, he now sought to install his own faction to govern it.

If the emperor trusted him, he’d interpret this as Huo Wujiu appointing capable allies. If distrustful, he’d see it as territorial consolidation and refuse, fearing Huo Wujiu’s growing power.

The latter would divide the empire and place them in direct opposition, but that would be manageable. With the number of troops at his disposal and the vast territory under his control, Huo Wujiu could declare independence if necessary.

After that…well, if Huo Wujiu were willing to claim the throne himself, that would be ideal. If psychological barriers prevented it, Jiang Suizhou had no qualms about becoming the usurping emperor who’d establish a nation to support him.

At this point, adhering to history no longer mattered.

Jiang Suizhou had pondered this deeply during his convalescence. The butterfly effect of his very presence had already altered the course of history.

It’d transformed into something entirely different.

Of course, he thought that history as a whole deserved to be respected, but the people recorded within deserved that respect even more.

And now that he was part of that rich tapestry, he wouldn’t allow the tale to unfold as it had before. He refused to live in a world where evil men prospered, loyal generals and ministers met tragic ends, and the common folk suffered needlessly. But most of all, he couldn’t bear to see Huo Wujiu walk the path laid out for him: crowning his treacherous cousin emperor, then exiling himself to guard the remote Yangguan frontier, haunted by the memories of his past glory and tragedy.

He wanted his beloved Huo Wujiu to remain vibrant and untamed forever.

In that case, Jiang Suizhou had his work cut out for him. There were many tasks to be done, and he might as well see them through to the end.

However, these thoughts remained locked in his heart, unspoken.

Huo Wujiu, naturally unaware of any of this, held the brush with visible impatience. Still, he forced himself to carefully transcribe each name on the list without complaint.

Jiang Suizhou watched quietly for a while until Huo Wujiu eventually spoke.

“After this, you must rest for a few days,” he said, still dutifully writing. “There’s nothing urgent left. I can handle the rest.”

Jiang Suizhou merely glanced at him.

“We’re not done yet,” he replied. “Don’t think you can keep me confined.”

After leaving the imperial study, Huo Wujiu was at his wits’ end. Though he was both worried about Jiang Suizhou and displeased with him, he dared not voice it.

As a result, he redirected his temper to Li Changning—maybe it was his fault, actually, for prescribing ineffective medicine that had failed to restore Jiang Suizhou to full health.

He vented his anger on Li Changning for a while, but the physician remained unfazed. He merely allowed Huo Wujiu to rail against him for as long as he needed, letting the words flow in one ear and out the other.

As a highly experienced physician, Li Changning was well aware of how troublesome lovestruck individuals could be.

Once Huo Wujiu left, he casually turned to Wei Kai.

“Emotional fluctuations, destructive chewing, excessive barking and howling… All clear signs of mating behavior in canines.”

“What are you talking about?” Wei Kai asked, bewildered.

“Just thought you should know,” Li Changning said with a small, enigmatic smile. “While I specialize in humans, I do have some understanding of veterinary medicine as well.”

***

These past few days, Jiang Suizhou had been meticulously organizing the roster of officials both within and beyond the capital.

He singled out all the ministers who possessed exceptional capability but were somewhat lacking in moral fortitude. Some he coerced with threats; others he enticed with promises of wealth and status—but soon all of them assumed governance of various prefectures and counties under the strict supervision of Huo Wujiu's soldiers.

With this bureaucratic reshuffling complete, Huo Wujiu was free to methodically withdraw his troops, stationing them outside the city walls as a stabilizing force. Within days, order began returning to Southern Jing's various cities and towns.

To the common folk, a local magistrate made far more difference than a distant emperor. So long as an upright official was presiding over the county office, few cared who was actually occupying the golden throne.

Lin'an underwent the same process, as Jiang Suizhou carefully handpicked an assortment of ministry officials to resume their posts. Though initially terrified by Huo Wujiu's sudden and violent seizure of power, many found reassurance in Jiang Suizhou's presence. Gradually, they reintegrated themselves into the court.

Only two factions remained unaddressed—the Pang faction, still awaiting reckoning, and Southern Jing's centrist old guard, led by Qi Min.

Jiang Suizhou was particularly reluctant to give up on Qi Min.

He knew the man's brilliance, his sterling reputation, and his historical fate—persecuted to death under Pang Shao's regime. With the entire court in a panic, the nation needed Qi Min's stabilizing presence now more than ever.

Having settled all the urgent matters, Jiang Suizhou personally paid a visit to Qi Min's residence.

Jiang Suizhou's recovery was far from perfect. Whenever he overtaxed himself—which wasn't difficult to do—his complexion would turn ashen. For this reason, Huo Wujiu objected vehemently to his

excursion. In the end, he could do nothing to stop him and instead insisted on accompanying him in the carriage at the very least.

Armed guards still encircled the residence of the Grand Master of Ceremonies.

The second Jiang Suizhou set foot on the ground, all the nearby servants cowered like startled cicadas, not daring to raise their eyes.

Yet despite the air of dread, it seemed that Qi Manor still operated in an orderly fashion. It was proof that despite Huo Wujiu's surveillance, he'd never mistreated them.

Guided by attendants, the pair proceeded directly to Qi Min's courtyard.

Unsurprisingly, it was a modest residence, with a small courtyard full of parasol trees. Huo Wujiu led Jiang Suizhou up the steps, firmly grasping his arm with one hand. When they reached the top, he used his other to push open the door for him.

An imperious and arrogant gesture, to be sure, yet it was also laced with deep fondness and meticulous care. It gave the impression of a colossal dragon fiercely guarding its treasure.

Jiang Suizhou had little choice but to indulge him.

They entered Qi Min's bedchamber to find him seated beneath a tightly shuttered window, book in hand.

When he heard the door open and footsteps approach, he did not deign to look up. Instead, he spoke casually as he turned another page.

"General Huo," he said, eyes downcast and serene. "Have you finally lost your patience after keeping this old man here for so many days?"

With that, he set the book down on the table.

"If you've come to persuade me to surrender, you may leave now. If you've come for my life, then do as you please."

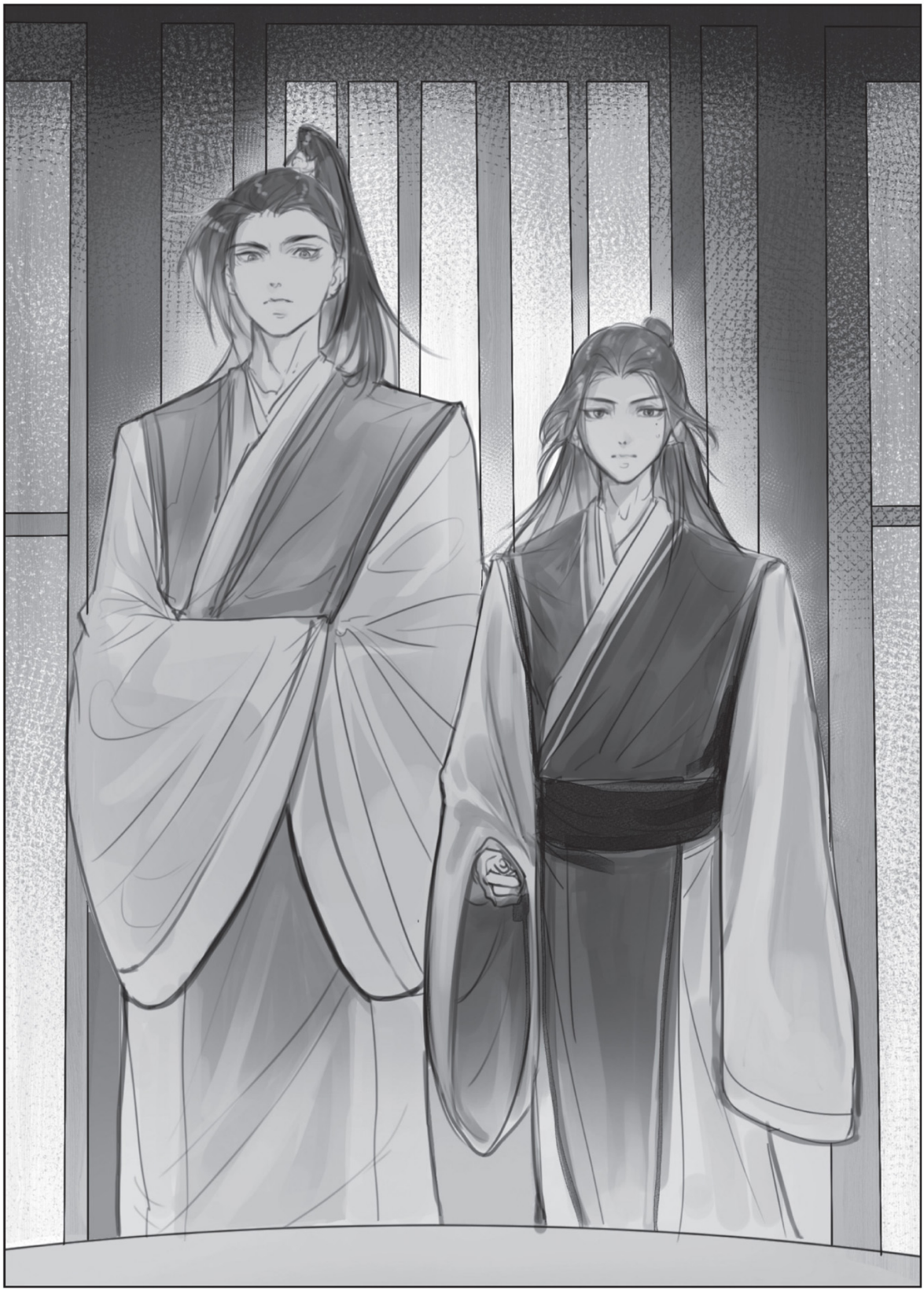
Only then did he lift his gaze toward the door.

In an instant, the composed, resolute expression froze on his face.

"Your Highness the Prince of Jing?" He stood at once, about to speak, but his eyes darted to the figure behind Jiang Suizhou.

These two men, who should have been locked in mortal enmity, now stood side by side. The rebel general Huo Wujiu—who had slain the emperor—even had a hand on the Prince of Jing's arm, his cautious demeanor as though he were shielding some fragile treasure.

Qi Min glanced back and forth between them several times, momentarily speechless.



Chapter 101

BEFORE QI MIN COULD SPEAK, Jiang Suizhou stepped forward with a gentle smile and a nod. “Minister Qi.”

Qi Min’s eyes lingered first on the prince, then on Huo Wujiu.

“Your Highness, please sit,” Qi Min said, straightening his posture.

Jiang Suizhou acknowledged him with a hum and took a seat in the chair opposite.

“I’ve come to discuss certain matters with you,” Jiang Suizhou said.

Still a bit stunned, Qi Min remained silent for a long moment before speaking.

“I’ve heard some rumors over the past few days. I was unwilling to believe them, but now it seems they may hold some truth.”

Jiang Suizhou had a fair idea of what he meant.

Officially, the Prince of Jing’s fate had remained unknown since the coup. But nothing that happened within the palace could stay concealed, and certain assumptions could be made. Huo Wujiu now occupied the imperial palace, the emperor was dead, and the prince had mysteriously vanished.

However, since no death had been declared, he must have been alive.

Furthermore, everyone knew of the Prince of Jing’s long-standing complicated relationship with Huo Wujiu. Now that Huo Wujiu held power, the fact that he had chosen to detain the prince without killing him naturally invited speculation.

Jiang Suizhou remained utterly composed in the face of Qi Min’s probing. He’d anticipated this.

“It is true that General Huo rescued me from peril,” Jiang Suizhou stated plainly.

Qi Min studied him for a long moment.

“Then, the recent arrangements within and beyond the capital—were they all Your Highness’s doing?”

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

“And have you come today to persuade me on Huo Wujiu’s behalf as well?” Qi Min pressed.

Again, Jiang Suizhou did not deny it.

He knew Qi Min was a man of forthright words and deeds. There was no sense in beating around the bush with him.

Seeing his tacit admission, Qi Min exhaled deeply.

“I should have suspected. I knew such things were beyond Huo Wujiu’s capabilities,” he said. “But Your Highness, you were always so clear-sighted! How could you be so misguided now?”

Huo Wujiu clicked his tongue impatiently, apparently finding the conversation tedious and grating.

Jiang Suizhou shot him a cool glance.

The very instant their eyes met, Huo Wujiu stiffened. Though obviously displeased, he obediently held his tongue and whipped his head aside with a huff.

Before coming, he had promised Jiang Suizhou that he wouldn’t antagonize Qi Min.

Jiang Suizhou returned his attention to Qi Min.

“What do you mean by that, Minister Qi?” he asked.

Though Jiang Suizhou’s silent exchange with Huo Wujiu was silent and fleeting, it hadn’t escaped Qi Min’s notice. When Qi Min looked back at him, his gaze was laden with unspoken thoughts.

“Personal sentiment should never be conflated with matters of state, Your Highness,” he said in a solemn tone.

“But none of my decisions were driven by personal sentiment,” Jiang Suizhou insisted candidly. “Likewise, my visit today to urge your return to court is not for personal reasons either.”

“Then what are your reasons?” Qi Min’s voice rose slightly.

Jiang Suizhou sat composed, his expression serene and unwavering.

“I act to preserve my own life,” he said. “And my urging today is for the sake of the court.”

“The court?” Qi Min let out a humorless laugh. “Where is the court now, Your Highness? If you were to tell me you intend to ascend the throne, then this old man would acknowledge a court. But if not—where, then, does my court lie?

“And should you not feel the same? The late emperor failed you, and Pang Shao monopolized power, but the nation of Southern Jing still stood strong. That was your homeland as well, and you chose to destroy it with your own hands. Why, then, should you rush to persuade me to serve the Huo family’s new regime?”

His agitation triggered a fit of violent coughing.

“A virtuous woman does not serve two husbands; a loyal minister does not serve two masters,” he muttered hoarsely once it subsided. “As long as Huo Wujiu is the one backing you, Your Highness, you need not waste your breath. You may leave.”

Jiang Suizhou listened to all of this in respectful silence.

“I see. Very well, then, Minister Qi,” he said, rising to his feet. “However, if you have the time to spare, I ask you to ponder something after I take my leave.”

Qi Min looked up at him.

“If a woman entrusts herself to the wrong man, must she waste her life on an unworthy scoundrel? Is that truly virtuous? If a loyal minister never encounters a ruler worthy of his devotion, must he stand by and watch the land drown in suffering? Is that truly loyalty?”

Qi Min didn’t answer. Jiang Suizhou went on.

“Personally, I believe that a woman need not preserve her chastity for anyone. She should live true to her own wishes, strive for greatness, and cherish her time and efforts as much as anyone. Likewise, a minister should never bind himself to a single dynasty or ruler but to the people he serves. If ‘loyalty’ means chaining oneself to a sinking ship, then that loyalty doesn’t mean much at all.”

He took a step back.

“If you consider my words and find that your heart is set on repaying old debts to the nation and the late emperor, then I shall press no further. But if your heart is devoted instead to the common people of this land, then I urge you to pledge your loyalty to them regardless of who sits upon the throne.”

His gaze was calm yet resolute.

“For me, my home and nation are simply the vast land beneath my feet and the open sky above—nothing more and nothing less.”

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During the carriage ride home, Huo Wujiu remained silent the entire time.

“What’s on your mind?” Jiang Suizhou eventually prodded.

Huo Wujiu just turned his head and fixed him with a contemplative gaze for a long moment.

“What is it?” Jiang Suizhou asked, puzzled.

Then Huo Wujiu leaned in and pulled him into an embrace with effortless familiarity.

“You know, I’ve always hated listening to civil officials argue,” he said. “When those pompous blowhards start spouting their incomprehensible drivel with such conviction that they spew spit everywhere…all I can think about is how I’d rather be listening to monks chanting sutras.”

Jiang Suizhou burst into laughter at that.

“But for some reason, today was different,” Huo Wujiu added.

“I see. And what was different about today?” Jiang Suizhou looked at him with amusement.

Huo Wujiu answered in complete seriousness, “I just kept thinking, ‘Where did I get such good taste?’”

Jiang Suizhou arched a brow, waiting for him to elaborate.

But Huo Wujiu didn’t explain a thing.

He had always believed that a person’s bones were shaped by what surrounded them. Soldiers like him had bones forged of iron, carrying the cold, metallic scent of blood. Civil officials, on the other hand, had bones molded by endless volumes of poetry and literature—they smelled of ink and paper to some, but to Huo Wujiu, it was the stench of rotting books.

By all rights, Jiang Suizhou should have been no different from any other pampered noble youth, and Huo Wujiu had seen plenty of those.

But for some reason, Jiang Suizhou was the only exception.

Tall and upright, open and unburdened, with a mental clarity that none around him possessed—to be near him was to be intoxicated by him.

His bones were sculpted from freedom and light, and he radiated a warm glow that pulled people in like moths to a flame. Even if it meant turning to ash, they would still throw themselves at that warmth, desperate to embrace it.

Huo Wujiu was no different.

Crashing into Jiang Suizhou, he captured his lips in a fierce kiss.

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A few days later, a major incident shook the capital.

The heavily guarded residence of the former Grand Master of Ceremonies Qi Min was abruptly stripped of all its defenses. The next day, the minister openly emerged from his home, boarded a carriage, and entered the imperial palace.

That same day, Qi Min was promoted half a rank to become the new Grand Chancellor, overseeing all civil officials south of the Yangtze River.

This not only shocked the court but also spread like wildfire among the common folk inside and outside Lin’an. In an instant, officials and citizens alike understood one thing clearly—Huo Wujiu was not the indiscriminate butcher they had feared.

His vengeance had a target after all. Though he led his troops to assassinate the emperor and burn the palace, he spared the people and officials, even reappointing the latter to key positions.

Finally, the court officials' collective unease began to settle somewhat. Even if Huo Wujiu had previously harbored intentions to eliminate them, he wouldn't dare touch the revered Qi Min. Thus, now that even Qi Min stood among them, it was clear Huo Wujiu had no plans to discard them.

Although much of the tension dissipated, opinions about Qi Min were hotly divided. Some praised Huo Wujiu's wisdom in retaining him, while others condemned Qi Min as a traitor.

At the end of the day, no matter how wildly people speculated, only Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu knew what Qi Min truly thought.

The first day Qi Min returned to the palace, he went directly to the imperial study to see Jiang Suizhou.

"This vast land does not lack an old relic like me," Qi Min said. "But in these turbulent times, if you have use for me, I am willing to lend my aid."

"Your integrity is commendable, Minister Qi," Jiang Suizhou replied.

Qi Min raised a hand to stop further words from him.

"This old man merely wishes to avoid carrying the regret of failing the people into his twilight years," he said. "However, once the realm is at peace, I ask that Your Highness not force me to stay. Allow me to retire to the countryside."

Jiang Suizhou nodded. "I would never force you. Everything shall be as you wish."

With that, the officials of Lin'an finally had a leader to rally behind, bringing some semblance of order to the court south of the Yangtze.

Though the situation was far from stable, it had at least been untangled. With Qi Min's assistance, the mountain of documents on the imperial desk dwindled drastically. After a grueling period of relentless work, Jiang Suizhou could finally take a step back and breathe.

Huo Wujiu, too, sighed in relief. He felt immensely frustrated having to watch Jiang Suizhou, frail as he was, run himself ragged day after day.

After allowing Jiang Suizhou to do as he pleased all this time, surely now he had every right to pin him down and force him to rest for a while?

As the chaos subsided, Huo Wujiu felt thoroughly content. He was in such high spirits that he even took the time to inspect the troops outside the city.

Unfortunately, his good mood lasted less than four hours before he received word that Jiang Suizhou—after returning to his chambers—had changed clothes and left again.

This time, his destination was Lin'an's imperial prison.

Why would he willingly spend even a minute in that blood-drenched, oppressively grim place?

Huo Wujiu immediately dropped everything and rushed over to intercept him.

"Where are you going?" Huo Wujiu demanded, his expression dark.

"I heard you've imprisoned Pang Shao in the imperial prison. I intend to see him," Jiang Suizhou answered calmly.

Huo Wujiu's brow furrowed. "You've barely recovered, and you want to go to that freezing hellhole?"

"Now that matters have mostly calmed, I think it's time to give him his release," Jiang Suizhou said.

Huo Wujiu fell silent.

For someone like Pang Shao, death was the greatest mercy. Though Huo Wujiu had killed Jiang Shunheng on the spot in a fit of rage, many debts remained unsettled.

That was why he had deliberately kept Pang Shao alive—to ensure he paid every last one.

And by his reckoning, the accounts were still not balanced.

Reading his expression, Jiang Suizhou guessed his thoughts. He placed a reassuring hand on Huo Wujiu's strong and sturdy arm.

“Death may seem too kind, but stripping him of all ignorance beforehand is the best revenge we can possibly exact.”

“But you—”

“If you’re worried, why not come with me?”

This time, Huo Wujiu didn’t refuse.

Chapter 102

THE IMPERIAL PRISON was a step above the bone-chilling and damp palace dungeons, but it was still a wretched place to be. This was where the capital's most dangerous officials were held.

Pang Shao had not known a single day of peace since his arrival. The soldiers under Huo Wujiu's command were well-trained in the art of torture, honed from their treatment of prisoners of war.

They subjected Pang Shao to excruciating torment daily yet kept his mind and basic bodily functions intact—denying him even the brief reprieve of unconsciousness, much less death.

Pang Shao had long lost track of time.

The moment Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu stepped into the dungeon, the pungent stench of blood assaulted them. Huo Wujiu frowned in displeasure, then stopped Jiang Suizhou just before they reached the cell.

"Wait here," he said.

Though confused, Jiang Suizhou complied.

Huo Wujiu strode quickly ahead, glanced into the cell, then wrinkled his nose in disgust.

With a wave of his hand, he summoned a few soldiers to his side. They busied themselves with something Jiang Suizhou couldn't quite see, and then Huo Wujiu returned to naturally take his hand.

He led Jiang Suizhou around the corner to Pang Shao's cell. The metallic tang of blood hung thick in the air. Peering in, Jiang Suizhou saw Pang Shao slumped in a corner atop a pile of straw, a cloth draped over his body from the shoulders down.

Outside the cell, several soldiers stood in formation behind an empty chair.

"What is this…?" Jiang Suizhou glanced at Pang Shao, then up at Huo Wujiu in confusion.

“It’s nothing. Sit,” Huo Wujiu ordered flatly.

He didn’t need to explain—in fact, he couldn’t bring himself to try. Truthfully, he was afraid the sight of a tortured man would be too gruesome for Jiang Suizhou’s eyes.

Having endured a month of torment in prison himself, Huo Wujiu knew exactly how filthy and unsightly such places were, how horrifically mutilated prisoners could become.

To him, it was nothing. He could interrogate a man while eating without batting an eye.

But Jiang Suizhou? Absolutely not. Jiang Suizhou was the purest, most timid white rabbit.

At least, that was how he seemed in Huo Wujiu’s eyes. But even if Jiang Suizhou wasn’t as fragile as he imagined, he still refused to let him be accosted with such sights.

Jiang Suizhou studied Huo Wujiu for a moment, then turned to Pang Shao.

Pang Shao’s sunken eyes gleamed eerily in the dim light. The bloodstains seeping through the cloth made it clear what Huo Wujiu was hiding.

Jiang Suizhou didn’t argue. He allowed Huo Wujiu to guide him to the chair.

“Lord Pang,” he said. “I hope you’ve been well.”

Pang Shao let out a harsh, grating laugh.

“Are you satisfied now?” he asked.

Jiang Suizhou slowly shook his head.

“I should be asking you that. Lord Pang, after all this, are you satisfied?”

A derisive sneer spread across Pang Shao’s face, twisting his gaunt features so uncannily that he resembled more a demon crawling from hell than a man.

“Framed and tortured half to death,” he croaked, “why wouldn’t I be utterly satisfied?”

“Do you not understand even now, Lord Pang? I am not the one who did this to you,” Jiang Suizhou said with a small, grim smile. “You did it to yourself.”

Pang Shao stared at him with venomous intensity, but Jiang Suizhou remained unfazed.

“Was it not you who humiliated Huo Wujiu and sent him to my doorstep?” he continued calmly. “Was it not you who backed me into a corner, forcing me to retaliate to protect myself? Everything I’ve done, everything Huo Wujiu has done—Lord Pang, our actions were only ever the backlash of your own.”

“What pretty words,” Pang Shao spat. “But why bother with the lecture at this point? Afraid I’ll come haunting you after death?”

Huo Wujiu clicked his tongue irritably and stepped forward as if to storm into the cell and teach him a lesson.

Jiang Suizhou yanked him back. Or rather, Huo Wujiu yielded to his silent request. After a pause, he obediently retreated.

“You’re just going to let him spew this garbage?” Huo Wujiu growled through clenched teeth.

Jiang Suizhou ignored him. Instead, he coolly addressed Pang Shao once more.

“A man drenched in sin cannot become a vengeful ghost. Right now, I’m merely here to collect the life you owe to those you’ve killed.”

He met Pang Shao’s gaze.

“You know exactly how much silver you hoarded in your storerooms. But do you know how many lives you’ve taken?” he asked. “If you don’t, I can tally them for you. The officials who defied you, the ministers who stood in your way, the commoners left destitute by your corruption, the refugees who starved to death during the locust plague because of your greed—can you even count them all?”

“Who bothers counting ants after they’ve been crushed?” Pang Shao answered with a smirk.

“Which is why, when you were captured and imprisoned here, no one fought for you and no one came to your aid. You had no friends or allies;

only rats fleeing a sinking ship," Jiang Suizhou said softly.

He paused briefly.

"Ah, but there was one," he added. "The late emperor, Jiang Shunheng—he wasn't an ant, was he? He waited for you until his dying breath, you know. He believed until the very end that you, his beloved uncle, would come back and save him."

Only then did Pang Shao's gaze flicker.

Jiang Suizhou looked at him quietly.

Even Jiang Shunheng could be seen as a little pitiable, but Pang Shao was a true villain through and through, capable of neither remorse nor shame. He might have felt the tiniest shred of pity for his nephew, but the only way to truly make him grieve was to let him hear with his own ears how his empire had crumbled.

"Despite all I did to drive a wedge between you two, he still clung to his memories of the hollow affection you once showed him. He trusted you with his whole heart," Jiang Suizhou continued. "Everything you had—your once-unshakable power, your mountains of gold and silver—it all hinged on the foolishness of one man, didn't it? What a pity that your own paranoia convinced you he was clever enough to overthrow you, let alone distrustful enough to try, and so you plotted to remove him from the throne. That is what gave me my opening.

"Do you see now, Lord Pang? Who else could have dragged you down from your lofty position but you?"

With that, Jiang Suizhou rose to his feet.

"Reflect on it carefully before you die, Lord Pang," he concluded, his tone indifferent. "There was no one in the world easier to deceive than Jiang Shunheng. You had everything, yet somehow it wasn't enough. In the end, it was you who chose to cast aside the throne and press the knife to your own throat. No one else."

Then he turned and walked out.

The others filed out after him, leaving silence in their wake.

Pang Shao stared fixedly at the empty air before him.

“Idiot,” he muttered scornfully, his voice like ice.

The insult was not directed at the Prince of Jing, of course, but the late emperor.

He had cursed Jiang Shunheng like this countless times over the years, silently in his heart and in whispers behind his back. The man was simply too stupid.

But as he said it this time, the image that surfaced in his mind was of Jiang Shunheng as a child.

A chubby little boy around seven or eight, round as a ball with a dull-witted look on his face—but like all children, his naivete had been a bit more charming then.

He would look up at Pang Shao with bright eyes, curious but timid, and ask questions in a meek little voice that came off as a bit pitiful, but not to the point of being grating.

“When will you come to see me next, Uncle?”

A child like that would occasionally make one remember to slip him a piece of candy.

He was born a spineless fool, and he stayed that way his entire life. Even into his thirties, he was still too blind to see people for what they were.

Really, truly, Jiang Shunheng was an idiot.

He deserved to be used.

Pang Shao lowered his gaze, forcing back the heat rising behind his eyes.

Just then, footsteps echoed down the hall again. Pang Shao looked up to see Huo Wujiu returning alone.

He stopped before the cell and locked eyes with him.

“Listen well,” Huo Wujiu said, cold and blunt. “I was the one who ruined you. I will be the one who kills you. What could a sickly weakling like him possibly do? There’s only one man who can kill you whenever he wishes—me.”

Pang Shao frowned, unsure why he was saying this.

Huo Wujiu gave him a frigid glare.

“Better get a good look at me now, in case you do manage to turn yourself into a ghost,” he said. “If you come for vengeance, make sure to target the right man.”

With that, he turned and quickly stormed away, leaving Pang Shao momentarily baffled.

So…Huo Wujiu had come back solely to threaten him, and for what? Because he was actually afraid he might haunt Jiang Suizhou as a vengeful spirit?

Pang Shao nearly laughed aloud.

The legendary General Huo Wujiu, a man who had spent years on the battlefield, drenched in the blood of his enemies, still believed in ghosts?

How laughably stupid.

And yet, Pang Shao wasn’t laughing. In fact, the longer he thought about it, the harder it became to muster even a mocking smile.

He had seen how meticulously Huo Wujiu cared for that frail Prince of Jing. Suddenly, the bizarre interaction made more sense—Huo Wujiu didn’t fear ghosts; he feared ghosts *haunting Jiang Suizhou*.

Love, whether romantic or familial, blinded all men equally in the end.

Perhaps it was stupid and overly sentimental, but it was the most intangible things that held the power to topple empires after all.

Jiang Shunheng resurfaced in his mind.

He remembered that moment of desperation, when he had no choice but to reveal his dealings with Huo Yuyan to secure troops. He remembered how Jiang Shunheng hadn’t questioned him at all but handed over the tiger tally and simply asked, *“You’ll protect me no matter what, won’t you, Uncle?”*

Of course he wouldn’t. And deep down, Jiang Shunheng must have known that as well.

Then again, perhaps he really hadn’t grown up at all. Maybe in his heart of hearts, he was still just that same foolish child who barely saw his

imperial father all year, waiting only for the one or two candies his uncle might bring in his sleeve on his next visit.

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Immediately after leaving the imperial prison, Huo Wujiu suddenly claimed he'd forgotten something and went back inside, only to return empty-handed. When Jiang Suizhou asked what he'd gone back for, Huo Wujiu refused to answer. His expression suggested he found the entire thing embarrassing, so Jiang Suizhou didn't press further.

A few days later, Pang Shao died.

Though he'd lived in grandeur, his death passed without fanfare. As devoted as his former faction members had seemed, they were now far too busy currying favor with the new leadership of Southern Jing to spare a thought for their old master.

Jiang Suizhou found himself with genuine leisure at last.

With Qi Min handling most affairs, court officials could manage routine matters on their own. Jiang Suizhou only needed to make decisions on the few documents that reached the imperial desk. Even then, his daily workload rarely exceeded four to six hours—especially since Huo Wujiu insisted on screening everything first before taking care of military affairs, handling whatever he could without Jiang Suizhou's involvement.

Thus, Jiang Suizhou had even more free time.

However, neither he nor Huo Wujiu knew that ever since their joint visit to the imperial prison, a particular rumor had been spreading like wildfire through the military ranks.

The soldiers whispered that their general had, for whatever reason, taken a kept man into the palace.

Some said the general had been seduced by the man's extraordinary beauty; others claimed that he'd been "infected" by the prince's proclivities during his time as a concubine.

The speculation varied widely and reached the ears of many superior officers—including some of Huo Wujiu's most ardent admirers, who simmered with indignation but had no outlet for their frustration.

Until one day, one of those officers entered the palace to find an unexpected sight.

This officer was a general in command of ten thousand men, who reported to Huo Wujiu as his superior. He had urgent matters to discuss with General Huo.

But when he stepped into the imperial study, he found a stranger seated at the desk instead.

The stranger was a man with delicate features, upturned eyes, and a small red mole dotted beneath one eye. He was unmistakably a man, yet he was unnervingly beautiful.

The commander's heart sank.

This had to be the rumored kept man!

Chapter 103

THE GENERAL'S EXPRESSION HARDENED, and his gaze turned hostile, like he'd sighted a bitter enemy.

Jiang Suizhou, however, remained oblivious.

He had been notified that a visitor sought entry to the imperial study, but he assumed it was a court official of some sort. He granted permission without looking up from the documents in his hands.

Yet as footsteps approached and stopped before the desk, no one spoke.

Who was this?

Frowning, Jiang Suizhou lifted his gaze to see a soldier in full armor—clearly a general by his attire. Presumably, he was looking for Huo Wujiu.

But Huo Wujiu had spent the last two days dismantling Pang Shao's remaining power networks and wasn't in the palace. Seeing the officer's hostile stare, Jiang Suizhou assumed some crisis had arisen outside the city. But as he opened his mouth to inquire further, the general suddenly spoke first.

"How dare you sit there when General Huo is absent!"

The general's voice boomed aggressively, making his towering frame and icy expression all the more intimidating. The sudden outburst startled Jiang Suizhou into flinching.

Quickly straightening up once more, he met the man's glare.

More than anything else, he was simply puzzled.

"What?" he asked.

"It seems General Huo has become a poor judge of character indeed," the general said coldly. "Know your place. Don't presume to overstep just because you enjoy his favor. Do you think such underhanded tactics will win you power?"

Jiang Suizhou’s confusion deepened.

As he arched a brow and tried to formulate a response, Meng Qianshan stepped forward.

“Who do you think you are, causing a scene here?” he said indignantly. “Guards—”

Jiang Suizhou raised a hand, cutting him off.

The officer must have misunderstood something vital here, but at the same time, Jiang Suizhou’s current position was…delicate. Military stability depended on clear and unambiguous leadership—no matter how chaotic court politics became, the chain of command had to remain singular and absolute.

Right now, that chain led to Huo Wujiu. For that matter, even Huo Wujiu’s authority wasn’t entirely secure with Huo Yuyan of Northern Liang opposing him.

It was best to keep most of the men ignorant about a remnant of the previous dynasty like Jiang Suizhou. The last thing the troops needed to know was that a former prince of Southern Jing still held substantial power.

Jiang Suizhou had already advised Huo Wujiu to keep his identity hidden from the military until the situation stabilized.

With that in mind, Jiang Suizhou quickly realized that this general had apparently mistaken him for Huo Wujiu’s pampered boy toy.

“I suppose you’re right,” Jiang Suizhou said. He set down his brush and propped up one elbow on the desk, leaning forward with interest. “But what exactly is my place, pray tell?”

He failed to realize it himself, but the moment he smiled, his already striking features grew even more vividly animated.

The man’s face immediately flushed with outrage.

“You’re just the general’s plaything!” he spat. “Now get the hell out of that seat before—”

Just then, a low, dangerous voice rumbled through the room like the thunder of an impending storm.

“Who needs to get the hell out?”

Jiang Suizhou looked up, surprised to see Huo Wujiu back already.

The visiting general, on the other hand, whirled around in fear to see his superior officer storm into the room. He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, his general came to a stop before him and fixed him with a glare so frigid that his eyes seemed to well with ice water.

There was no doubt about it: The general had caught him berating his darling.

He was doomed.

“I asked you a question.” Huo Wujiu’s words emerged through clenched teeth.

At his angriest, Huo Wujiu was terrifying. Even Jiang Suizhou had once frozen under that glare. Though this officer held firmer, the vicious ferocity in those eyes still made his knees go weak.

Yet despite his fear, he felt a pang of bitter righteousness. He was an uneducated man, but he still he knew the tale of King You of Zhou, who amused his concubine by lighting the warning beacons needlessly and lost the trust of his court. Since ancient times, weak men often fell prey to beautiful women, but he’d never imagined his own general would succumb.

His indignation surged into bold and reckless bravery.

Setting his jaw, the man decided to face his fate head-on.

“He’s just a random homosexual!” he cried. “Dote on him if you must, General, but don’t allow him to meddle in military affairs! Kill me for speaking so, but you know I’m not wrong!”

Something seemed to snap behind Huo Wujiu’s previously frigid eyes, abruptly sparking a blazing inferno instead.

“Say that again if you dare,” Huo Wujiu growled, seizing the man’s collar.

Jiang Suizhou hastily rose from the throne and intercepted them, catching Huo Wujiu’s arm before his fist could land.

“Enough,” he murmured under his breath to Huo Wujiu. “He meant well. I was only teasing him earlier.”

The officer stood stock-still, his body rigid with fear and conviction as he awaited punishment. Turning to him, Jiang Suizhou offered a conciliatory smile.

“No need to be so concerned, General. As a mere civilian, how could I understand documents on the imperial desk?” he said lightly. “I was only browsing them for my own idle amusement. Now, you two should discuss your business, so I’ll—”

Before he could finish, Huo Wujiu grabbed his wrist.

“Who are you calling ‘General’?” Huo Wujiu demanded, displeased.

Jiang Suizhou blinked.

What? Was Huo Wujiu seriously jealous that he’d called another man “General”?

Before he could answer, Huo Wujiu had shoved the officer backward with enough force to send the large man stumbling several steps.

“Didn’t I teach you not to spout nonsense?” Huo Wujiu barked. “Look carefully. This is the Prince of Jing, and I’m his concubine. He’s my husband.”

The word “husband” landed like a boulder. The man’s eyes bulged.

Huo Wujiu pulled Jiang Suizhou against his side with one arm.

“A wife follows her husband’s lead. All I own belongs to him, not just this measly throne. Even if I conquer the world, every inch of it will belong to him. Understood?”

For a long, tense moment, the imperial study was dead silent. The lower-ranked general was so stunned he thought he might be dreaming, and Jiang Suizhou was almost as startled himself.

After the officer left, Jiang Suizhou wasted no time in dragging Huo Wujiu into the bedchamber behind the imperial study.

“Why did you say that?” he asked, a bit frantic.

Huo Wujiu’s anger hadn’t subsided. He sat on the daybed, his hands braced on his knees.

“Was what I said wrong?”

“Didn’t I tell you before? My identity—”

“I never wanted to agree to that,” Huo Wujiu interrupted, frowning. “You were the one who forced me to.”

He was still upset with the entire situation, and his tone with Jiang Suizhou was considerably more unyielding than usual.

Unsettled, Jiang Suizhou just looked at him quietly for a moment.

Huo Wujiu took a couple of deep breaths, then reached out and pulled Jiang Suizhou into his arms.

“Listen, it’s fine,” he said more gently. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“But…”

Huo Wujiu turned his face to look him square in the eyes.

“No ‘buts,’” he said. “Just tell me, do you trust me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then relax. Don’t let me scare you; these men are my brothers, the ones I’ve fought and bled with. They won’t turn on me over such a small matter. If you trust me, you can trust them. Even if we die here together, they won’t turn to Huo Yuyan’s side.”

Jiang Suizhou thought for a moment, then nodded.

Huo Wujiu took a letter from his robe and handed it to Jiang Suizhou.

“This is why I came back,” he said.

Jiang Suizhou unfolded it and saw the Zhaoyuan Emperor’s handwriting.

“Your uncle wrote a reply?” he asked.

Huo Wujiu intoned a vague noise of confirmation.

Jiang Suizhou carefully read through the letter.

As he expected, the Zhaoyuan Emperor readily agreed to Huo Wujiu’s proposal and asked only for Huo Wujiu’s patience as the requested officials prepared to head south. Furthermore, the emperor assured him that if he needed anything else, all he had to do was ask.

“Can this be trusted?” Jiang Suizhou asked, glancing up at Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu nodded. “It came with an imperial decree.”

“An imperial decree…” Jiang Suizhou let out a heavy sigh. “In that case, it will be publicly announced. Those officials will become imperial envoys under your uncle’s protection. As expected, only Huo Yuyan harbors ulterior motives.”

Huo Wujiu was silent for a moment before scoffing dismissively.

“Always been scheming since childhood,” he muttered. “Wasting it on pointless things. Pathetic.”

Though his tone was scornful, Jiang Suizhou knew he wasn’t as indifferent as he pretended.

“What if you weren’t in Southern Jing right now?” Jiang Suizhou asked softly.

Huo Wujiu glanced at him. “What?”

Privately, Jiang Suizhou couldn’t help but recall Huo Wujiu’s fate in the original version of history.

“If Southern Jing hadn’t fallen, and if I wasn’t here,” he pressed, “if you were still in Northern Liang and knew of Huo Yuyan’s intentions, what would you do?”

Huo Wujiu didn’t hesitate.

“Honestly, I couldn’t be bothered to fight him,” he said. “He thinks he’s in a competition with me, but it’s one-sided. Let him throw his tantrums. Just because he wants the throne, he assumes I must as well? I don’t.”

That indeed sounded like the Huo Wujiu he knew.

Just as Jiang Suizhou thought this, sighing inwardly, Huo Wujiu turned to look at him.

“But that hypothetical is useless,” he said. “Southern Jing did fall, and you are mine now. Even if there’s nothing I want for myself, I’ll fight for what’s yours. Today, it’s me he wants dead—what if tomorrow he

decides you're the next problem to eliminate? I won't give him that chance."

When he heard this, the last remnants of heaviness in Jiang Suizhou's heart dissipated.

Right. There was no need to dwell on how history should have been. What mattered was that things were different now.

Jiang Suizhou smiled fondly.

"True," he said. "You *did* come to the palace without a single coin of dowry. Shouldn't you at least contribute something?"

Huo Wujiu gritted his teeth. "You're never letting that go, are you?"

Jiang Suizhou laughed. Then, remembering how boldly Huo Wujiu had declared himself a concubine to his subordinate moments ago, he laughed harder.

"You said it yourself, didn't you? A wife follows her husband's lead," he teased. "And what kind of wife are you? Not only did you offer no dowry, but you don't even know how to serve your husband properly. You're lucky I'm so merciful—otherwise, I'd have divorced you long ago."

His laughter only made Huo Wujiu's teeth itch.

Not only was he being outrageously bold, but that laugh of his was downright provoking. And that smug little grin on his face—was it because he knew Huo Wujiu wouldn't dare take it too far with his fragile health?

As punishment, Huo Wujiu leaned in and kissed him roughly, a few times in quick succession, but Jiang Suizhou kept laughing.

How impudent!

A fire ignited in Huo Wujiu. In one swift motion, he flipped Jiang Suizhou onto the daybed, pinning him there.

"A wife's duties, huh?" Huo Wujiu growled, his warm breath fanning over Jiang Suizhou's face. "Then shall we see how well I serve my husband?"

Chapter 104

WHAT HUO WUJIU LACKED in experience, he made up for in enthusiasm.

He still knew how to bring pleasure to a man. There were plenty of methods, after all.

Jiang Suizhou hadn't expected to provoke such a reaction from him, and he panicked at first. He tried to dodge but found himself pinned firmly in place. On the one hand, there were no truly urgent matters to attend to at the moment, but on the other…it was hardly appropriate to do such things in broad daylight, was it?!

Though Jiang Suizhou still clung to some sense of propriety, Huo Wujiu had long abandoned his own.

That was especially true when he was so determined to prove a point that he ended up stoking his own flames even higher in the process.

By the time Huo Wujiu finally released him, over two hours had passed.

The fragrance of ambergris now mingled with the scent of something far more intimate, the mere wisp of which could make even the most battle-hardened soldier blush like a maiden.

Not that Jiang Suizhou had the energy to care any longer. He slumped against Huo Wujiu's chest, utterly drained. His hands ached terribly. Even his wrists felt numb, as if disconnected from his body.

Truly, this man was endowed with inhuman qualities. Fortunately, they had only skimmed the surface this time. If they had gone any further, it might have cost Jiang Suizhou his feeble life.

Their dalliance left Jiang Suizhou feeling wiped out, but Huo Wujiu seemed positively invigorated.

Casually holding Jiang Suizhou with one arm, he lounged with the smug satisfaction of a conqueror. During the proceedings, he certainly

hadn’t cared enough to keep things neat and tidy—the evidence of their activities was plentiful and dappled haphazardly around them.

Grinning, he leaned in to press a flurry of kisses to Jiang Suizhou’s face.

“Well, Your Highness?” he murmured. “How did this humble concubine serve you?”

Jiang Suizhou kept his eyes closed, unwilling to humor him.

“Humble concubine,” indeed! What kind of concubine got so carried away halfway through that he gripped his lover’s hands like a vise to keep him from pulling back even an inch? Who had been serving whom in the end, really?

Jiang Suizhou couldn’t even muster the effort to glare. He rested his sore, tingling hands limply on his own body, cursing inwardly.

Not that Huo Wujiu was waiting for a response.

With a low, contented chuckle, he hugged Jiang Suizhou tightly. Almost immediately, his hands began to wander—one moment kneading Jiang Suizhou’s fingers, the next teasing at his waist.

“Behave,” Jiang Suizhou finally muttered, his voice hoarse.

“I am behaving,” Huo Wujiu replied before planting a firm kiss on his temple.

Jiang Suizhou lifted an eyelid before turning his head away, too exhausted to move.

He really was spent, even from simply this. These particular activities hadn’t been overly strenuous, but they were enough to push his sickly constitution to its limits. Meanwhile, Huo Wujiu remained annoyingly energetic.

Not long after, he carried Jiang Suizhou to the bed to rest and insisted that he’d finish processing the remaining paperwork for him.

The ambergris perfume in the hall was deeply soothing, and Jiang Suizhou drifted off quickly. When he next opened his eyes, dusk had fallen.

A few palace maids and eunuchs stood nearby, led by Meng Qianshan.

“Ah, His Highness is awake?” Meng Qianshan exclaimed, hurrying forward to help him sit up. “General Huo left a while ago but instructed us to escort you back as soon as you woke up.”

“He left?” Jiang Suizhou wasn’t fully alert yet, rubbing his temples. “Where did he go?”

“There was urgent business outside the palace. He said it was important, but he also said he wouldn’t be back too late, so Your Highness needn’t wait for him.”

Jiang Suizhou let out a soft laugh.

“He certainly knows how to flatter himself,” he said dryly, though his tone was fond. “Who said anything about waiting?”

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The matter that required Huo Wujiu’s attention was indeed urgent.

After days of investigation, Pang Shao and his remaining faction had finally been completely rooted out. The confiscated gold and silver alone were enough to fill nearly half the national treasury.

With such a staggering sum at stake, no one dared handle its redistribution except Huo Wujiu himself.

In fact, this was the matter which that general had come to address earlier in the day. After Huo Wujiu finally received the news, he cleared the documents from Jiang Suizhou’s desk and headed out to take inventory.

And what an inventory it was: the Pang estate was practically overflowing with gold, silver, pearls, jade, calligraphy, paintings, and antiques.

Throughout history, most corrupt officials at least had the sense to hide their ill-gotten gains, no matter how much wealth they’d accumulated.

Pang Shao was different.

All of these treasures were brazenly displayed throughout his mansion and piled up in his storerooms. Pang Shao had been the most powerful man in the entire land, after all—save the emperor, who trusted

him implicitly and listened to his every word. Naturally, he had nothing to fear.

The sheer volume of assets kept Huo Wujiu poring over ledgers until nightfall.

Once the accounting was done, he allocated a portion for military expenses and deposited the majority into the national treasury—which, for all intents and purposes, had become his personal coffers. With his future uncertain, these funds were reserved for his troops and their future needs.

That out of the way, he earmarked another hefty sum to reward the army. He had always been generous with his men, sparing no expense when it came to their provisions and pay.

Wei Kai was well accustomed to his methods.

As Huo Wujiu calculated meticulously, Wei Kai assisted in distributing and recording the allocations.

Efficient as ever, Wei Kai watched as the ledger's numbers dwindled, the mountains of gold and silver gradually finding their destinations.

Until, at last, one sum of silver remained.

It was a mere drop in the bucket compared to the rest of the fortune Pang Shao had amassed, but it was still an eye-watering amount. Huo Wujiu's finger paused over the entry, his expression contemplative.

Wei Kai, however, was eager. "General, how should we handle this?"

It seemed like a nonissue—his general had never cared for wealth. Every bit of their spoils was spent where it mattered most, never kept for himself.

But this time, no answer came.

Wei Kai looked up, only to be met with his general's icy, displeased glare.

Then, with a snap, Huo Wujiu closed the ledger.

"The rest is for my own use," he said flatly.

Huh? This was completely unprecedented.

"General?" Wei Kai said, stunned.

Huo Wujiu clicked his tongue impatiently.

“What, can’t I skim a little off the top?” he retorted, scowling yet utterly unapologetic.

The question left Wei Kai momentarily dumbfounded. Before he could recover, Huo Wujiu stood and spoke again.

“Send someone to check the bookshops,” he ordered. “Auctions, antique dealers, all those kinds of places. Ask around—both inside and outside the capital.”

This did nothing to lessen Wei Kai’s bewilderment.

“Er, General…we can barely read well enough to get by,” he said delicately. “I’m not sure your men will be capable of finding something specific, if that’s what you’re after…”

This response gave Huo Wujiu pause.

He had his reasons for keeping the money, but those reasons weren’t exactly acceptable to voice aloud.

Wealth had never mattered to him. Growing up well-off and wanting for nothing, he had no real concept of—or interest in—money, even as an adult.

But after he spent the day taking inventory of Pang Shao’s hoard, watching countless rare treasures pass before his eyes, a new type of covetous desire stirred within him for the first time.

What right did that old bastard have to hide away such rarities, to fill his home with such luxuries, while Jiang Suizhou—a prince by blood—had so little in comparison?

The injustice rankled him. All these exquisite things should have been Jiang Suizhou’s.

Yet he also knew Jiang Suizhou had no interest in useless trinkets.

After he carefully allocated funds where they were most needed and sent the rare artifacts and paintings to the treasury, the piles of wealth dwindled. It was then that an odd urgency gripped Huo Wujiu.

The treasury was full. The troops would feast tonight, with generous rewards. But what did Jiang Suizhou have?

And so Huo Wujiu seized the last remaining sum.

He had to buy Jiang Suizhou something.

But…what, exactly? What did he like? As Huo Wujiu asked himself that question, he immediately recalled the quiet, absorbed expression Jiang Suizhou wore when reading.

Hence his order to Wei Kai.

Yet now, faced with this new query, he faltered.

What books should he buy Jiang Suizhou? He honestly didn't know any better than Wei Kai.

Huo Wujiu pondered for a long time, gritting his teeth in frustration.

"Just get the best ones you can find," he finally declared. "Never mind the content. Just make sure it's the most expensive one."

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That night, Huo Wujiu returned to the palace in the late evening.

He went straight to Jiang Suizhou's chambers and found him seated by the window, robes draped loosely over his shoulders, studying a weiqi board. Steam curled gently from the tea at his side, its fragrance perfectly accenting the quiet serenity of his expression.

Huo Wujiu's breath caught in his chest.

At the sound of footsteps, Jiang Suizhou looked up. "You're back."

The second their eyes met, Huo Wujiu's traitorous mind conjured the memory of him flushed and breathless in his arms earlier that day.

Huo Wujiu awkwardly cleared his throat. After a brief pause, he took a seat opposite Jiang Suizhou with perfectly feigned nonchalance, though his mind was still elsewhere.

"Mm," he said. "I finished my work."

Seeing him come in and immediately sit down in front of the board, Jiang Suizhou assumed Huo Wujiu enjoyed the game as well. He gestured

for Meng Qianshan to bring more tea.

“You have an interest in weiqi? Perfect. I’ve been stuck on this game. Maybe you can help?”

Huo Wujiu stared grimly at the board.

Of course he had no interest. His father had once beaten him half to death trying to force him to learn, which didn’t exactly cultivate a love of the game.

He remained completely fixated on the pieces not because of some deep passion for weiqi but to avoid looking at Jiang Suizhou. The man was lethally alluring. As Huo Wujiu had only recently begun to explore the magnitude of his desire, he knew one taste would only lead to craving more.

Averting his gaze, however, didn’t seem to help.

As he studied the scattered mess of black and white stones, his mind conjured the image of Jiang Suizhou’s equally pale white throat beneath his heavy black ceremonial robes.

Huo Wujiu’s breathing grew a little heavier.

Opposite him, however, Jiang Suizhou only saw how deeply he contemplated the board before him—clearly riveted by the possible strategies.

Huo Wujiu’s sharp features were even more striking in the lamplight, and his solemn intensity radiated a dangerous magnetism.

He’s always particularly handsome when he’s serious, Jiang Suizhou thought.

Huo Wujiu surveyed the battlefield for a long moment. Before him, the two sides of the board were like warring forces clashing across a combat zone.

Both sides were locked in a deadly stalemate. At this point in the battle, each move was critical; a single misstep could mean the difference between victory and defeat.

With a casual air that somehow conveyed the gravitas of a general commanding armies, Huo Wujiu picked up a black stone from the bowl and placed it on the board with a decisive clack.

That stone fell like a general charging forward with his banner raised high, and suddenly the cavalry rushed in after him.

Jiang Suizhou excitedly leaned in to examine the game, only to tilt his head in confusion.

In one move, Huo Wujiu sent an aggressive unit of black stones plunging headfirst into an encirclement of white stones—and to their deaths.

Just like that, the black stones had lost. It was nothing less than complete and total capitulation.

Jiang Suizhou looked up at Huo Wujiu, slightly puzzled, only to find Huo Wujiu already watching him intently.

His expression was indifferent, and his gaze seemed placid as he absentmindedly fingered a weiqi piece. The next words out of his mouth, however, were quite unexpected.

“It’s time to sleep.”

Jiang Suizhou blinked, then glanced outside. The night was indeed deep.

“Right,” he said, turning back to Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu remained seated, unmoving. Jiang Suizhou grew even more confused.

What’s with this man? All of a sudden he’s telling me to go to bed, yet he won’t leave my room?

Chapter 105

BEWILDERED, JIANG SUIZHOU quietly studied Huo Wujiu, who stared right back at him unflinchingly.

Then, understanding dawned on Jiang Suizhou.

“But—”

“What, are you kicking me out?” Huo Wujiu cut him off, looking at him as if the answer were obvious.

The words lodged in Jiang Suizhou’s throat.

Pressing his lips together, Jiang Suizhou watched as Huo Wujiu raised his hand toward Meng Qianshan.

Meng Qianshan, of course, immediately understood that General Huo wanted to be alone with his beloved. With a barely suppressed, knowing smile, he ushered the other attendants out of the room.

Now, only the two of them remained.

Jiang Suizhou turned back to Huo Wujiu just in time to see him sweep the weiqi pieces aside, brace his elbows on the board, and lean in.

“Your bed is plenty spacious,” Huo Wujiu said. “It’s not like we can’t both fit.”

With no one else around, Huo Wujiu grew wildly audacious. A hint of mischief crept into his smile, transforming it into a devilish smirk. Truly, he looked the very picture of an immodest and overbearing rogue who knew that Jiang Suizhou couldn’t refuse him.

But beneath the bravado, Huo Wujiu was nervous, a paper tiger baring its teeth.

He wanted to stay, and he wanted it enough to act out without shame. Yet for all his domineering posturing, if Jiang Suizhou insisted he leave, he’d resign himself to doing so.

So despite his grin, his heart was pounding, and his chest felt tight.

Jiang Suizhou was shy, and Huo Wujiu didn’t want to anger him by pushing him too far. Still, it was one thing to be alone as a bachelor, but now that he’d had the chance to hold him, it became agonizingly difficult to get through those nights he had to spend alone.

Huo Wujiu, impatient by nature, couldn’t endure it.

His eyes remained fixed on Jiang Suizhou, who silently stared at nothing for a long time.

Eventually, Jiang Suizhou shot him a sidelong glance.

“Clean up the weiqi pieces first,” he said. “You were the one who scattered them everywhere, so you’d better pick them up.”

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Huo Wujiu had finally gotten his way.

Though he’d achieved it through a mix of shamelessness and coercion, it was a hard-won victory nonetheless. One could say he’d earned it fair and square.

This kind of joy was beyond words. He vividly remembered the day he conquered Yecheng and planted the Huo army’s banner atop the palace gates. It was the most exhilarating, joyous moment of his life—until now.

The hollow thrill of seizing an empire was nothing compared to this solid, tangible contentment and warmth.

Outside, the night was thick and still. Inside the chamber, only a few lamps remained lit, their glow dimmed into nothingness by the drawn bed-curtains. Normally, Huo Wujiu would have found this kind of darkness unpleasant and unwelcome, but right now, it was nothing but peaceful and serene.

He stretched out a little, feeling thoroughly at ease.

Smack!

A light slap landed on Huo Wujiu’s wandering hand as it groped a bit too close to Jiang Suizhou’s waist.

“Stop fidgeting,” Jiang Suizhou warned. “I’m still taking medicine, and I have business to attend to tomorrow. I can’t handle your nonsense right now.”

Huo Wujiu’s restless hand immediately stilled.

“I wasn’t fidgeting,” he said solemnly—but before the words were fully out, a low chuckle escaped him.

They were so close together that the vibrations of his laughter hummed against Jiang Suizhou’s ear, sending a peculiar tingling sensation through his skin and straight to his chest.

It was…dangerously hard to resist.

“Why are you laughing? Go to sleep,” Jiang Suizhou muttered.

Huo Wujiu pulled him closer.

“No particular reason; I was just thinking…” he said. “Why’re you acting so docile? You could’ve kicked me out earlier, you know.”

“I can still kick you out now,” Jiang Suizhou pointed out dryly.

But before he could act, Huo Wujiu’s laughter rumbled again as he effortlessly pinned Jiang Suizhou’s legs down, rendering him immobile.

“Too late,” Huo Wujiu murmured, amused.

Jiang Suizhou could only roll his eyes before closing them with a sigh. What an unexpectedly childish man.

Beyond the bed-curtains, the candles burned quietly.

This night was a first for both of them.

For the first time in either of their lives, they spent an entire night inextricably entwined within someone’s warm embrace, lulled to sleep by the sound of calm, slow breathing and steady heartbeats.

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Though Huo Wujiu had successfully wheedled his way into Jiang Suizhou’s bedchamber—a feat that both Meng Qianshan and Wei Kai

celebrated, seeing his painstaking efforts rewarded—he alone knew the truth: He could look but not feast.

Jiang Suizhou was still recovering from his many injuries, and he was always fatigued from handling various affairs of state. In other words, he simply didn't have the energy to entertain whatever else Huo Wujiu might've had in mind.

Yet Huo Wujiu was practically floating on cloud nine, his proverbial tail raised proudly in the air.

He'd once scorned men who turned soft and spineless after marriage, but now he understood. Just seeing that man every day and embracing him at night was enough to fill him with deep contentment. Even if the most he could do was hold him and massage his sore back, that was just fine.

He didn't need anything more.

Jiang Suizhou, however, was suffering.

Huo Wujiu had way too much energy!

Maybe he could have managed with his former body, but his current one was sickly and frail, and his wounds had yet to heal. He was always nodding off by nightfall, yet Huo Wujiu would stay by his side and pester him with fumbling touches and light groping regardless.

Additionally, there was one other issue that consistently popped up between them—another appendage of Huo Wujiu's that couldn't be tamed. It would perk up without rhyme or reason, standing proudly until Jiang Suizhou gave him a helping hand.

But while Jiang Suizhou's touch sufficed the first couple of times, it failed to satisfy Huo Wujiu for long. Soon, he felt the need to explore other avenues of pleasure and annoyance.

So this was what it meant to invite a wolf inside your house.

Yet as exhausting and obnoxious as it could be, Jiang Suizhou found himself helplessly charmed by his insistent advances. When Huo Wujiu looked at him with those deep and scorchingly intense eyes, suddenly as vulnerable as a wounded puppy…well, it was difficult to resist the urge to indulge him.

He'd truly fallen hard.

The days passed by in this way for a while as they waited for the delegation to arrive from the north, and the sixth month drew to a close.

It was the hottest time of the year in Lin’an, and Jiang Suizhou found his spirits languishing. Although his injuries were mostly healed, his body was still weak. Furthermore, he couldn’t tolerate ice. Li Changning added several cooling herbs to his daily medicine to help him with the heat.

But Huo Wujiu had no such relief.

The ban on ice in Jiang Suizhou’s chambers spelled misery for Huo Wujiu. His body temperature already ran hot to begin with, and so he struggled greatly with the summer heat. Every night, he tossed and turned for hours before he could fall asleep.

But still, he refused to leave.

Jiang Suizhou couldn’t bear to see him suffer in the heat. Furthermore, Huo Wujiu had been exceptionally busy these past few days; he left early in the morning and returned late at night. The poor nights’ sleep was draining him of his vitality.

Concerned, Jiang Suizhou finally urged him to sleep elsewhere, but Huo Wujiu was stubborn. Despite his noble birth, he’d been forged into a man within military camps and on the battlefield. He was a hardened soldier, so when he dug in his heels like a willful, obstinate child, no one could rein him in.

Jiang Suizhou had no choice but to let him be and conceal his worries—until one night.

It was nearing midnight, and the daytime heat had largely receded. For those with a weak constitution, the temperature was perfectly comfortable, yet it was still intolerably warm for someone like Huo Wujiu.

Or rather, it would have been, if only he were there.

Jiang Suizhou sat slumped on the bed, reading a book. It was very late, and he was almost drifting off to sleep, but Huo Wujiu still hadn’t returned.

Jiang Suizhou yawned and turned a page.

Footsteps approached, and he looked up to see an unfamiliar soldier drop to one knee and cup his hands.

“Your Highness, the general asked me to tell you that he is occupied tonight and to urge you not to stay up waiting for him,” the soldier said.

“Oh. All right,” Jiang Suizhou said, a bit surprised. “Thank you for making the trip.”

The soldier quickly bowed and left.

Jiang Suizhou continued to sit there for a while longer. It wasn’t until Meng Qianshan came to help him get ready for bed that he awkwardly put away his book.

Usually, Huo Wujiu would come in and playfully take the book from his hands. That little ritual hadn’t gone on for very long, but he’d already grown used to it.

Thinking this, Jiang Suizhou couldn’t help but smile to himself. He let Meng Qianshan fuss over him, and then he lay down to rest.

While the days were hot, the nights were always pleasantly cool. Now that he didn’t have to deal with that restless human furnace tossing about and trying to feel him up, Jiang Suizhou fully expected to sleep peacefully.

But he didn’t.

As the night wore on, Jiang Suizhou found he couldn’t fall asleep. He could only lie in bed, staring at the shadows cast by the flickering candlelight in unnerving silence. The space beside him was distractingly empty. Since he was unused to these conditions, his sleepiness vanished.

For the first time in ages, Jiang Suizhou suffered from insomnia.

Whether it was Huo Wujiu’s overwhelming presence or simply his domineering nature, he’d already managed to imprint himself on every inch of Jiang Suizhou’s personal space.

Almost like a territorial dog.

Jiang Suizhou smiled at the thought.

The night deepened, and the water clock chimed outside, one slow note after another.

Ultimately, Jiang Suizhou’s weak body couldn’t help but succumb to exhaustion. But his sleep was light, and the slightest sound instantly stirred

him awake again.

He didn’t know how much time had passed before he heard something rustle beside him. Someone had carefully lifted the curtains and slipped in.

Jiang Suizhou opened his eyes to catch Huo Wujiu gingerly lowering himself into bed.

The moment he heard Jiang Suizhou stirring, Huo Wujiu’s head snapped up in alarm.

They stared at each other for a moment.

But the longer Jiang Suizhou looked at him like that, half asleep and a bit disheveled, the harder it was for Huo Wujiu to resist kissing his adorable, bleary-eyed face.

He leaned down and kissed the corner of Jiang Suizhou’s eye. Then, apparently deciding that wasn’t enough, he turned his head and kissed his lips as well.

There was no stopping after that.

By the time Jiang Suizhou managed to push him away, his sleepwear was askew, and he was completely ensconced in Huo Wujiu’s arms.

Jiang Suizhou turned his head and saw that the sky outside was already starting to pale.

“Is it almost dawn?” Jiang Suizhou asked.

Huo Wujiu hadn’t had his fill of kisses yet. Like a wolf on a scent, he buried his face in Jiang Suizhou’s neck.

Jiang Suizhou pushed twice but couldn’t get him to move.

“You didn’t have to rush back here, you know,” Jiang Suizhou said. “Why didn’t you go get some rest first?”

From his neck, Huo Wujiu replied in a muffled voice, “I couldn’t. I can’t sleep anywhere else.”

The corners of Jiang Suizhou’s mouth twitched, yearning to curve up into a smile at that answer.

“Then go to sleep quickly,” he said. “But what were you up to, anyway? What was so important that it kept you working almost through the night?”

Huo Wujiu obediently rolled over and pulled Jiang Suizhou into a tight, secure embrace.

“It’s a secret,” he said.

Accepting that answer, Jiang Suizhou smiled and didn’t ask again.

What secrets could Huo Wujiu possibly have? Though their time together had been brief, Jiang Suizhou’s trust in Huo Wujiu was absolute.

Though, to be honest, he couldn’t quite pinpoint where this unshakable confidence came from.

Jiang Suizhou closed his eyes to sleep. Beside him, Huo Wujiu stirred and fidgeted a bit before he settled down as well.

Only to abruptly flip over and sit upright with a huff.

Jiang Suizhou’s eyes flew open. “What’s wrong?”

Huo Wujiu’s back was turned to him as he flung his legs off the bed.

“Don’t you want to know what it is?” he asked in obvious frustration.

“But you said it was a secret,” Jiang Suizhou mumbled, still groggy.

Huo Wujiu haphazardly yanked on his boots, stood up, and spun around with an indignant glare.

“Since when did secrets stop you from asking?” he retorted.

Chapter 106

THE SHARP REPLY JOLTED Jiang Suizhou awake, and he propped himself up onto his elbows just in time to see Huo Wujiu fling aside the curtains and storm off in search of something.

Moments later, he returned and thrust a book into Jiang Suizhou's hands.

"Here," he said gruffly. "For you."

His expression appeared calm, but inside he was practically vibrating from nervousness.

After scouring every corner of Southern Jing, his men eventually tracked down this book at an auction house in Yangzhou. Apparently, it had once been part of a prestigious family's collection, until their fortunes declined and their good-for-nothing heir—given to every vice imaginable—had no choice but to sell it off.

The literati supposedly prized this work beyond measure, praising it as if it had descended from heaven itself. It must be something special, they said.

Neither Huo Wujiu nor his subordinates understood its value. But if scholars deemed it precious, then by all rights, it should belong to Jiang Suizhou.

This was the task that had kept Huo Wujiu away the entire day. He made the long journey to Yangzhou himself, spent a fortune at the auction to secure what he saw as little more than a tattered old book, and returned in the dead of night with his prize.

Jiangnan teemed with gifted scholars and wealthy gentry, many of whom had set their sights on this remarkable find. In the days leading up to the auction, betting pools even sprang up in Yangzhou, with wagers placed on which distinguished collector would ultimately claim the famed work.

Yet in the end, it was the mysterious stranger known only as "Second Master Huo" who walked away with it.

The auction house nearly descended into chaos. One eminent scholar—who had tried and failed to outbid Huo Wujiu—was so incensed that he stormed out in a huff.

Not that “Second Master Huo” cared about any of this in the slightest. He had much more important concerns, like tucking the book safely away and racing back to the palace to sleep beside his husband.

To his eyes, the book was hardly anything special.

Its cover was worn and shabby, the handwriting inside a chaotic, sprawling mess, and the language so obscure he couldn’t make head nor tail of it.

Huo Wujiu couldn’t fathom why scholars would covet such rubbish.

So now, anxiety gnawed at him. He was terrified that Jiang Suizhou wouldn’t like it either.

He stole a glance at Jiang Suizhou as he flipped through the pages. So far so good, it seemed…and then his expression went completely blank.

Jiang Suizhou could only stare down at the tattered book, frozen in place.

This…this was the original manuscript of a renowned yuefu[7] poet from the previous dynasty!

Even during his lifetime, the author had been celebrated as a literary genius. No one after him could replicate his divine artistry, nor even begin to approach his brilliant mastery of the art form. Despite the limited communications of the era, a random verse of his could spread far and wide by word of mouth alone. By modern times, his works would become household classics, known to scholars and commoners alike.

And this collection was penned in his own hand.

Every stroke of the brush, every revision in the margins, every fleeting inspiration—all of it had been preserved within these pages. Just opening to a random sheet felt like conversing directly with the master across centuries. This was wildly different from trying to decipher the poet’s thoughts through sterile printed copies and verses alone.

For a moment, Jiang Suizhou was speechless.

A thousand years later, even a single surviving fragment of this manuscript would be enshrined in the national museum as a priceless cultural relic. He'd seen one such remnant before—it bore just a few broken phrases, nothing like the complete volume now in his hands.

It was far too surreal.

Jiang Suizhou was still in a daze as he opened his mouth to speak—only for Huo Wujiu to suddenly snatch the book back.

"Never mind, it's not much of a gift," Huo Wujiu said brusquely. "More of a joke, actually. It's just a shabby old book, right? I'll throw it away for you."

He was a little frustrated, though not entirely surprised. As expected, the book was worthless trash only the most pretentious and penniless of scholars would go for.

Better get rid of it fast, he'd thought as he watched Jiang Suizhou's expression turn cold the moment he opened it.

But the instant he took the gift back, Jiang Suizhou lunged forward in a panic and nearly toppled off the bed in his haste to reclaim it. Huo Wujiu barely caught him in time, swiftly hooking an arm around his waist to steady him.

"What are you doing?!" Huo Wujiu exclaimed.

"What are *you* doing?!" Jiang Suizhou shot back. He made another grab for the book. "Don't throw it away!"

Huo Wujiu glanced down at the "worthless" book, stunned. To think Jiang Suizhou actually treasured the tattered thing… Well, if Jiang Suizhou valued it, it couldn't be garbage. Suddenly, the manuscript didn't seem quite so overwhelmingly ratty to his eyes.

The next moment, Jiang Suizhou carefully—even reverently—wrested it back.

To Jiang Suizhou, this wasn't just a book. It was the heart and soul of a genius, a priceless treasure of civilization. With this, people a thousand years in the future could commune with the poet's spirit through the pages, just as he was doing now.

No amount of money could buy such a thing.

“Where did you get this?” Jiang Suizhou asked.

Huo Wujiu masked his swelling pride and delight behind nonchalance.

“I bought it.”

“You went out today just to buy this for me?” Jiang Suizhou asked.

The question made Huo Wujiu’s chest grow even lighter.

Ha, so you like this shabby old thing after all? See how good I am to you? As long as you’re mine, you’ll get whatever your heart desires. I’ll pluck the very stars from the sky and uncover treasures beyond the value of mortal money.

No matter what it is, I’ll give all of it to you.

His eyebrow arched, and a little grin tugged at one corner of his mouth.

“It was a bit of a trek. Getting there and back took some time.” His tone was casual, but his invisible tail was raised high in the air.

Unfortunately, Jiang Suizhou seemed to like his gift a little *too* much. He cradled the book carefully, as if he feared it would crumble at the slightest touch, and delicately flipped through the pages.

He was far too absorbed in the book to remember to praise the large dog in front of him for fetching it.

For a while, Huo Wujiu basked in the secondhand glow of Jiang Suizhou’s joy, but before long, his satisfaction started to curdle.

Jiang Suizhou just kept turning the pages, absolutely silent! Why wasn’t he asking him how far he’d gone? Or anything about how much effort it took?

What was so damned special about that thing that it deserved Jiang Suizhou’s undivided attention, while the gift-giver went ignored?

Huo Wujiu glared at the book—then abruptly snatched it away again.

Thinking he meant to discard it, Jiang Suizhou lunged forward to reclaim the precious manuscript. But this time, Huo Wujiu deftly evaded him, tucking the book safely aside with one hand while using the other to pull Jiang Suizhou firmly against his chest.

“It’s still dark out. Who reads books in the middle of the night?” he snapped. “Have you no duties tomorrow?”

Jiang Suizhou’s gaze remained locked on the treasure just out of his reach behind Huo Wujiu.

“Nothing urgent,” he said without hesitation.

Jiang Suizhou’s single-minded attachment to the book caused a tidal wave of jealousy to swell in Huo Wujiu’s chest.

“Nothing urgent?” he repeated, his voice dropping dangerously low.

“Be careful; you might damage it,” Jiang Suizhou cautioned, eyes still glued to the book.

Paper was fragile against the ravages of time. If this priceless artifact were torn or fell apart under their care, wouldn’t he become one of history’s greatest villains?

This was a treasure for future generations!

His single-minded words of concern for the millennium-spanning relic, however, became the final spark to the simmering flames within Huo Wujiu’s gaze.

So this stupid, scribble-filled book was more important than he was?

Clenching his jaw, he shot Jiang Suizhou a withering glare and tossed the book aside.

Jiang Suizhou’s heart seized as he watched that priceless artifact arc through the air to land with a gentle plop on the nearby table.

“Please, be gentle!” he cried.

“Oh, I’ll be gentle,” Huo Wujiu assured him.

Then he yanked the bed-curtains shut and pressed Jiang Suizhou back onto the bed.

***

It was over two thousand miles from Yecheng to Lin’an, and delegations of officials never traveled very quickly. It would take at least a month or two for the requested Northern Liang officials to arrive.

With the onset of summer, the road conditions steadily improved, and it wasn't long before they received word that the delegation party was about to cross the Yangtze.

Huo Wujiu had to send someone to greet them.

He and Jiang Suizhou deliberated. The majority of Huo Wujiu's forces were already stationed at various posts, leaving only Lou Yue available for the task. After some consideration, Huo Wujiu dispatched him to lead a detachment to the riverside and welcome the visitors.

This was actually a crucial task—once these officials arrived, Huo Wujiu would assign them as he saw fit, and then Southern Jing would be entirely Huo Wujiu's domain.

They couldn't afford any mistakes.

After Lou Yue received Huo Wujiu's order, Jiang Suizhou summoned him to the palace for a special briefing before he departed.

"This matter is of great importance," Jiang Suizhou instructed. "I implore you to pay close attention to every single one of those officials from Northern Liang."

Lou Yue was already well aware of Huo Wujiu's current situation. Though he himself had long been a general of Southern Jing, he pledged his allegiance to Huo Wujiu; his life and future were bound to him. Seeing how cautious Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu were being, Lou Yue dared not act rashly either.

"Your Highness, please rest assured. I'll be careful."

"Naturally, I have the utmost faith in you, General Lou." Jiang Suizhou nodded.

Lou Yue paused for a moment, looking thoughtful.

"If I may…I have one more small request."

"Please speak freely," Jiang Suizhou said.

"As much as I dislike letting Wanjun go running around, I must admit I've kept her confined in Lin'an a bit much lately," Lou Yue explained. "The other day, she heard I'd be going out, and now she's very insistent about joining me. I'm truly at the end of my rope…"

Hearing this, Jiang Suizhou couldn’t help but smile.

While Lou Yue was a bit of a chauvinist, he was also quite indulgent toward Lou Wanjun. If he wasn’t, she wouldn’t have ended up with her current personality.

“Miss Lou has always had a good sense of propriety. If you don’t wish to keep her confined, take her with you,” he said.

Lou Yue sighed. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

With that, he rose to take his leave.

“You know, General Lou, you needn’t worry so much about her,” Jiang Suizhou added. “Miss Lou’s personality is a bit…*unique* among ladies her age, but there’s no harm in that. I don’t think a lady must necessarily remain cloistered—isn’t that something those old pedants would espouse? Since you despise them, feel free to disregard their words.”

Lou Yue nodded in agreement, though he didn’t truly take in his advice.

With the delegation from the north about to cross the river, Jiang Suizhou urged them not to delay. After two days of preparation, the troops meant to welcome the officials from Northern Liang set off.

Lin’an was close to the Yangtze; their detachment would arrive in three to five days. In the meantime, scouts would run back and forth with updates. For the next few days, Jiang Suizhou meticulously tracked every bit of news from Lou Yue.

Huo Wujiu found his intense vigilance rather strange. It was as if he were bracing himself for a confrontation with a bitter nemesis.

“What are you so afraid of?” he asked. “They’re just civilian officials. It’s not like they’ll drown themselves in the river. Once they’re in the south, things will be fine.”

But Jiang Suizhou shook his head. “It’s always better to be careful. Until they cross the river, nothing’s set in stone.”

Huo Wujiu couldn’t persuade him otherwise, so he turned to Li Changning and instructed him to add a few calming herbs to Jiang Suizhou’s daily medicine.

This went on for five days, whereupon an urgent letter came in, delivered by a scout on horseback. Breathless from the journey, he galloped into the palace and collapsed to his knees with a thud as he presented the letter.

“The general says this is urgent. Please read it immediately, Your Highness!” the scout said.

Jiang Suizhou’s brows furrowed. He quickly took the letter and opened it.

It was Lou Yue’s handwriting, and it read:

All the officials have been delivered, but the crown prince of Northern Liang has arrived with them.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
After the Disabled God of War
Became My Concubine
VOLUME 4

CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

JIANG SUIZHOU 江随舟 ("WITH THE BOAT"): The subject of transmigration. Became the unpopular Prince of Jing, who was forced to take Huo Wujiu as his concubine.

HUO WUJIU 霍无咎 ("FAULTLESS"): The Marquis of Dingbei. A captured and maimed general of the Liang dynasty, forced to marry Jiang Suizhou.

PRINCE OF JING'S RESIDENCE

MENG QIANSHAN 孟潜山: Head eunuch of the residence.

GU CHANGYUN 顾长筠: One of the Prince of Jing's concubines.

XU DU 徐渡: Another of the Prince of Jing's concubines.

JING IMPERIAL COURT

JIANG SHUNHENG 江舜恒: Emperor You of Jing, the last emperor of the Southern Jing dynasty. The Prince of Jing's brother.

PANG SHAO 庞绍: An upper-first rank official and the maternal uncle of Jiang Shunheng.

JI HONGCHENG 纪泓承: A military official. Lou Yue is his patron.

LOU YUE 娄钺: A famous general of Southern Jing. Was close friends with Huo Wujiu's father.

LOU WANJUN 娄婉君: Lou Yue's daughter.

FANG ZHAOHE 方兆和: The newly appointed governor-general of Lingnan. Former prefect of Suzhou.

QI MIN 齐旻: An elderly high-ranking official. Well respected in court and opposed to Pang Shao.

NORTHERN LIANG

THE ZHAOYUAN EMPEROR 昭元帝: The emperor of the Northern Liang dynasty. Huo Wujiu's uncle and Huo Yuyan's father.

HUO YUYAN 霍玉衍: The current crown prince of Northern Liang. Huo Wujiu's cousin and sworn brother.

LI CHANGNING 李长宁: A traveling physician who infiltrates the Prince of Jing's residence with the intent of healing Huo Wujiu's legs.

WEI KAI 魏楷: One of Huo Wujiu's trusted subordinates. Pretends to be Li Changning's apprentice.

LI SHENG 李晟: A general of Northern Liang, tasked with defending the northern bank of the Yangtze River.

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

FAMILY

DAGE: A word meaning "big brother" or "eldest brother." It can also be used to address an older male relative (e.g. cousin) or unrelated male peer.

HUANGXIONG: A word meaning "imperial brother." A form of address for older male relatives of a similar age in the imperial family, usually meant for the emperor's elder brothers.

WUDI: A word meaning "fifth younger brother." Literally refers to the order in which the addressee was born in the family.

OTHER

-GONGGONG: A respectful form of address for a eunuch.

GLOSSARY

CONCUBINES: In ancient China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to possess concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status, hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have dozens or even a hundred.

IMPERIAL EXAMINATIONS: A series of examinations designed to select the brightest of the populace to serve in the court as officials. They were separated into three main stages: entry, provincial, then palace, focusing heavily on Confucian doctrine and literature. Passing the exam was a great honor: The top scorer, or Principal Graduate, of each exam would return home showered in accolades. It was the only method through which someone could become part of the aristocracy.

RANK SYSTEM: For much of Chinese history, officials were divided into ranks which denoted their status within the court, with upper-first rank being the highest. Courtesy demanded that lower-rank officials show appropriate respect to those ranked above them.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians similarly to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing or incapacitation.

About the Author

Liu Gou Hua is a signed writer with Jinjiang Literature City. Notable works include *I Became the Brother of a Whump Novel's Heroine* and *After the Disabled God of War Became My Concubine*. Her most popular title has accumulated over 450,000 bookmarks on Jinjiang and has been adapted into a well-received audio drama under the same name. It has been fully published in simplified Chinese print under the name "Lingering Clouds."

Footnotes

Chapter 74

[1] Shen Yi Jing (神異經), frequently translated as “Book of Gods and Strange Things,” is a collection of regional mythology attributed to the Former Han period Daoist master Dongfang Shuo.

Chapter 75

[2] The four most important academic or creative pursuits of ancient Chinese aristocrat-scholars. These involved the mastery of the following: a stringed instrument called the guqin, the game of weiqi (also known as go), calligraphy, and painting.

Chapter 76

[3] Regular script is the most modern form of Chinese characters and is still used today.

Chapter 77

[4] Dage (大哥, big brother) is a suffix used to politely refer to a man around the same general age as the speaker.

Chapter 79

[5] A pure and highly valued form of silver from Yunnan, so named for its unique texture and crystalline patterns evocative of snowflakes.

Chapter 100

[6] The Three Letters and Six Etiquettes are a set of five traditional pre-wedding rituals, including fortune-telling and dowry payment, with the

sixth ritual being the wedding ceremony itself. The investiture edict concerns the official declaration of a royal consort’s elevated status.

Chapter 106

[7] Yuefu (lit. “Music Bureau”) are poems composed in a folk ballad style, so named because of the imperial governmental organization originally charged with the creation and collection of these works. The term also applies to later imitations or adaptations of this poetry.

THE FAN-FAVORITE
TRANSMIGRATION DANMEI CONTINUES!

Can Love Change History?

Jiang Suizhou, modern-day history professor turned historical cut-sleeve prince, has helped Huo Wujiu regain his former self. The "god of war" can finally walk again, his men are embedded in the city, and soon he may have an army. But a most shocking discovery has rocked Jiang Suizhou: his feelings for Huo Wujiu go much deeper than simple camaraderie—an affection secretly reciprocated. However, when the woman destined to be Huo Wujiu's partner returns to the capital, Jiang Suizhou grows further conflicted. After all, he'd never get in the way of fate...would he?

Meanwhile, Minister Pang is setting in motion a plan to take down his nephew, the hedonistic emperor of Jing. Once this trap is sprung, will Jiang Suizhou's and Huo Wujiu's unspoken feelings for each other be enough to change the course of written history?

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